Log Horizon Loops

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Shiroe is taken by surprise by involuntary time travel, and it's doing weird things to his menu. Log Horizon enters the Infinite Loops.

Status: ongoing

Published: 2014-03-16

Updated: 2014-12-26

Words: 57036

Chapters: 8

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Humor - Characters: Shiroe/Kei S. - Reviews: 62 - Favs: 456 - Follows: 424

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/10191055/1/Log-Horizon-Loops

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

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Introduction
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8

Chapter 1

Author's Notes: What are the loops?

An unknown catastrophe damaged Yggdrasil, the computer system and world-tree that supports the multiverse. While the gods - system administrators - attempt to fix the problem, many universes are set to have infinite time loops to keep them stabilized. As time progresses, more universes begin to loop. Sometimes, loops fuse universes together; sometimes, loops are variants rather than the canonical setting.

Within a universe, the loop always begins with a single looper, the Anchor, who always remembers past loops. Over time, others will begin to loop, though less consistently.

The Log Horizon loops follow the continuity of the MLP Loops by Saphroneth, which in turn were based on Innortal's loops. Log Horizon loops contributed by an author other than myself are credited next to the loop number.

Shirogane Kei of Japan, or Shiroe of Theldesia, tried to calm his racing mind as he systematically analyzed his surroundings. His body felt strangely weak and ill-fitting, a sensation that he only remembered having once before.

This situation could only be called the opposite of that one. Instead of finding himself in the world of *Elder Tales* , he found himself back in his apartment, sitting at his computer desk. His body, healthy enough for a non-athletic human, possessed none of the easy strength of a high-level Adventurer.

The website on the screen in front of him proclaimed, "Countdown to the release of *Homesteading the Noosphere* , the latest expansion of the hit MMORPG *Elder Tales* ! Celebrating 20 years of adventure!"

The countdown showed hours remaining. It should have been zero. No, it should have been in the negatives.

Shiroe - he thought of himself by that name more than Rei, these days - knew of the time flow differences between Theldesia and Earth quite well. By Earth's reckoning, a Theldesian day lasted two hours; Earth observed 12 Theldesian days pass for every one of its own. As a gamer, Shiroe had regarded it as simply part of the game mechanics of *Elder Tales* .

In any case, Shiroe had spent enough time in Theldesia that he should not have returned to Earth on the same day and certainly not before he had left. Was it a hallucination, he wondered, or time travel, or was this just a dream?

A chat window popped up. Naotsugu asked if Shiroe would be online tonight for the update. As far as Shiroe could recall, Naotsugu had asked the same the first time. Chances were that, whatever was happening, Naotsugu was not included in the effects.

Shiroe pinched himself once, and then twice more for confirmation. "Ouch," he said as he shook out his hand. This almost certainly was not a dream.

Naotsugu was waiting for a reply. Shiroe pushed his glasses up. "I will be there," he typed on the keyboard with steady hands. They did not betray how loudly his heart beat in his ears.

The transportation had occurred just as the expansion occurred at midnight, as expected. One moment Shiroe had been watching the update's progress bar as it installed itself on the MMO's servers, the next he stood in the streets of Akiba in his Theldesian body - taller, more slender, and Half-Alv despite his rather human appearance.

Shiroe, turning his head to take in the strangely reassuring post-apocalyptic ruins of the city, took note that all of the other *Elder Tales* players displayed signs of shock at the transition. They panicked,

shouted, and wanted to know where they were. The reality was slow to sink in.

Having truly time traveled sounded more and more likely as time progressed. He did not particularly want to believe he had traveled through time, invalidating all his work, decreasing or removing his ties with others. He was not a naturally social person, and the need to reforge what he had before intimidated him. Nevertheless, he refused to give up.

Shiroe called up his status screen with a thought. The menu panel hovered in front of him, invisible to any bystanders. As long as someone had the proper amount of focus, manipulating the 'screen' did not require any movements.

Before he proceeded to the friends list, unexpected differences made him freeze and narrow his eyes. New tabs and text, some of which was unreadable, cluttered the menu screen.

He frantically but methodically paged through the tabs in an attempt to find the source of the alterations. The information on the character statistics tab made him flinch in surprise.

'Subclass: Looper (Anchor), Lv. 1'? That was nothing like the level 90 Scribe that Shiroe should have been. He had never even heard of the Looper subclass.

He took himself to the subclass menu. The information there was too much. Some of the abilities listed displayed glitched text formed from random symbols, but many were quite readable. His breath froze in his lungs.

'Live through repeated loops', 'retain memories from previous loops', 'access gains from previous loops'; Shiroe grasped what those could mean immediately. They made other abilities, like the 'access all subclass skill paths', barely catch his notice.

At the end of the list, and it was lengthy, he saw a special note. 'Permanent character status: Anchor. Upon loop reset, immediately placed in another loop.'

Gibberish made further explanations of the status unreadable. A quick check of the character info tab showed that whatever the status was, it did not give his stats a visible buff or debuff.

' *No matter,* ' he thought as he forced himself to resume breathing; he did not want to faint in the street.

The abilities he could read were clear enough. If the world around Shiroe was as real as he thought it was, he had indeed time-traveled. Furthermore, the wording of his abilities list implied that it could happen again. He needed to find out why, if he could, and if anyone else had experienced what he had.

However, Shiroe knew what he would do with this second chance: what he had before, but better.

He switched over to the friends list and scrolled down. Naotsugu, Touya, Minori… Akatsuki. His friends needed him. The menu changes could wait.

1.2.a

As Shiroe found himself in his computer chair once again, he could only sigh. Uncontrolled time-traveling proved to be quite tedious.

He leaned back into his chair and swiveled it around once. Part of him wanted to give up. Maybe, for once, he would not log into *Elder Tales* and would spend the loop relaxing on Earth. There were all sorts of things he could afford to try out thanks to the time loops. Vacationing somewhere tropical and learning how to scuba dive sounded enticing.

No, Shiroe finally decided, he would give Theldesia another try. He was afraid that he would have plenty of time for vacations later.

Once the transition occurred, Shiroe immediately brought up the status screen like usual. Thanks to the Looper subclass options, he could activate useful and mastered abilities from past loops right away.

He blinked. The menu had changed once again.

Portions that had been glitched and obscured by errors and nonsense text had been cleared up. Moreover, a new tab had been added - a help menu?

Without hesitation, Shiroe opened it. A title page and a table of contents unfolded in the air in front of him.

' *All About Looping*

By Saraswati and Iris

Editor: Seshat'

Shiroe was pretty certain that all of those names belonged to goddesses of different pantheons. Giving himself a mental shake and refocusing on the task at hand, he skimmed through the chapter list.

' *Chapter 1: Is Your Life Too Repetitive? Looping and You*

Chapter 2: Help, My Part Has Changed! Loop Variants

Chapter 3: You Are Not Alone - World Tree for Dummies

Chapter 4: Luggage for Loopers! Making a Subspace Pocket

Chapter 5: Tenuous Grasp on Sanity? Useful Tips and Tricks

Chapter 6: All the 'Do Not's - How to Avoid Breaking the Universe

Conclusion: By Sun Wukong'

Fighting a sudden headache, Shiroe rubbed his temples. He had a sinking feeling that he would need that vacation the next time around.

Saraswati checked that the updated patch had installed successfully. Two of her hands typed rapidly on her keyboard while a third manipulated the wireless mouse.

She thought to herself, 'Menu update, check. Text translation, done. Functionality, improved. Safety limits, active.' Everything had gone as planned.

Shortly after the loop's activation, which had started smoothly enough, an emergency in another loop had called her away and temporarily left the loop under the sole supervision of Iris, a reliable aide who specialized in transitions.

Realizing that the loop's coding wasn't up to par to dealing with the Earth-Theldesian transfer, Iris had immediately coded a patch that did the job. Unfortunately, her inexperience with managing loops had prevented her from noticing quite how enthusiastically Theldesia had incorporated the coding. Even Saraswati had needed a few loops to realize that the Anchor had an unusual amount of flexibility with applying changes to his Theldesian baseline.

Saraswati liked Iris too much to blame her for the patch's unexpected side effects; every loop had its quirks. Instead, Saraswati had seized the opportunity provided and incorporated a help file into a thoroughly debugged version of the patch. It would ensure that she did not have to worry about the Anchor or any Loopers getting 'the talk' later.

Her fourth hand brought a cup of chai tea to her lips as she watched Shiroe's actions on another monitor. Good, he had found the file as quickly as expected.

The unexpected chapter titles and presence of a conclusion registered in her mind.

Saraswati spit her tea across the keyboard. "That damn monkey!" she growled as she slammed her teacup down on her desk, only its inherent unbreakability preventing it from shattering.

' *When did that immature cretin of a trickster god get his paws on my file?!* '

1.2.b (Detective Ethan Redfield)

" *Chapter 6: All the 'Do Not's - How to Avoid Breaking the Universe,* " Shiroe muttered to himself, but loud enough that Naotsugu could hear him.

Naotsugu watched Shiroe with a discerning eye. Ever since the Apacalypse had happened, Shiroe had been...slightly different from how he expected. Sure, he was the intelligent man with glasses and nasty, beady eyes just as he imagined, but there was something about him, like he knew more about what was going on in this world than he should.

For example, he only ate one of the menu made sandwiches, and only one bite, then switched to eating fruits and vegetables almost immediately, the only things with taste. He seemed surprised that Nyanta was the player that saved Serara, but it was only an act he could tell. The most damning one though was he didn't contact Maria to get Serara's location when they arrived in Susukino. No, all he did was stare at his status screen, his eyes rolling from side to side and then down, like words were flitting across his screen at a high speed as he walked purposely towards Nyanta's house.

Even now, Shiroe was reading. The enchanter reached in front of him and tapped his menu screen, meaning he opened something new. The guardian was about to ask what he was reading when Shiroe blinked and tilted his head, mouth started opening. A single syllable word came out in confusion, "Eh?"

As Shiroe continued reading whatever, his eyes grew wider and wider, mouth drooping lower and lower until he finally shot up from his seat on the log and shouted, "EH!?"

Everyone looked to Shiroe, Akatsuki speaking first, "Everything alright, Milord?"

Shiroe looked around, blinked a couple times and rubbed the back of his head, "Uh, yeah," and then returned to his seat.

(Shiroe POV)

Shiroe sighed and opened his status menu again continuing where he left off just before getting on his griffon. Chapter 6 was not a particularly long chapter as it described a few simple actions that would cause his loop to collapse. It advised against such an option since he would be forced into a safe mode server...or worse the Eiken loop.

In Elder Tales, killing yourself wasn't an option to escape anyway, though the idea that some loopers tried to kill themselves once to escape these loops was mildly disturbing. Briefly, he contemplated if he would have so many loops that escape by suicide would seem a good option, then disregarded it. If the description of Eiken were true, he wouldn't want to end up there for any length of time. Furthermore, if his loop made him miserable, it was his duty to change the world and make it a better place.

It was at the end of the chapter that he came across an attachment, which was simply titled, ' *Ways Loopers Have Collapsed Their Own Loops.'*

It was an encyclopedia to itself on what other loopers have done to either end the loops, entertain themselves or make their loops easier to handle. Shiroe decided to read the table of contents and then come back to it later, as the initial help guide would be more helpful in these early loops. He figured this Encyclopedia would make good reading later on in the loops. His eyes scanned the table of contents...and then widened, "Eh?"

Chapter 1: Experiments

a. Experiments with the Sun

b. Experiments with High Explosives

c. Experiments with Gene Splicing

And that's where he stopped reading for a second. Interest peaked, Shiroe tapped on experiments with the sun and slid to a random page, and started reading about an attempt by a looper to change the color of the sun to blue, "EH!?"

1.3

Shiroe - no, Kei while on Earth, he reminded himself firmly - laid back contentedly against the rock lining the hot springs of which he was the sole occupant.

A little vacation really was just what he needed.

1.4

In a world where the United States server updated with the expansion before the Japan one, Kei had logged into his secondary account, Roe2.

Awakened at the moment of the Catastrophe, Shiroe stared down at his slightly more feminine hands and then performed a quick check. He did not equal Maryelle in that regard, thank g-

Thanks for nothing! Now Shiroe could understand Akatsuki's feelings in the baseline. He needed to get that potion out of his inventory.

He froze in horror. "Shit." The potion would be in the Shiroe account's bag of holding. Roe2, his Half-Alv Summoner *female* account, held much fewer rarities. Worse, his subspace pocket currently did not hold any spares.

The manual had warned about situations like this. He twitched, firmly deciding on his priority for the next loop, not that it helped now.

Shiroe tried to keep himself from thinking about what he knew about switching genders in Theldesia. Given enough time, he would stop feeling uncomfortable in his female body. His voice would change to match, even.

Desperately wishing for a distraction, he surveyed the area around him. It had a much lower density of Adventurers than Akiba. The zone around the town had a deserved reputation for its difficulty, making it more akin to Susukino.

On the plus side, being a Summoner with an Undine contract gave him sufficient access to fresh water. That was quite important here. Secret military bases generally lacked comfortable surroundings.

This desert town, Area 51, would not be an exception.

Shiroe remained oblivious to the horrified looks of some of his teammates; they had not known to mentally prepare themselves for the sight of a cute woman summoning scores of undead Skeletons and Phantoms.

Checking the parameters of his newest spell occupied Shiroe's full attention. Raid battles occasionally granted Phantasmal-class items or other class-specific benefits. Defeating the mutant alien boss had granted him a new contract: 'Servant Summon: UFO'.

He pushed his glasses up. That sounded like a fantastic way to travel.

1.5

When Shiroe had Awakened in Theldesia, it was moments after the Catastrophe. He searched for a quiet area in which to pick through his abilities and get in touch with his friends.

Keeping an eye on his surroundings, he paused at the sight of a building to his right. He couldn't remember any guilds in Akiba having a mansion that looked quite like that before. It looked a little like a refurbished school building, if the school had been built by a billionaire who liked pink.

Under a plum tree in the building's front yard stood a single person, a Ceremonial Tribe Summoner if Shiroe was any judge. The Adventurer was either a slightly androgynous girl or a slightly feminine boy; Shiroe honestly could not tell which. The person caught sight of him. "Excuse me!" they called, "I think I'm lost. Can you tell me where I am?"

"We're in Elder Tales, aren't we?" Shiroe replied gently as he approached the cast iron fence around the property. "Theldesia, you know? Everyone is lost right now."

The Summoner's brow furrowed cutely. (Shiroe sincerely hoped that she was, in fact, a girl; the other possibility was that looping into his Roe2 character had left its mark.) "What's Elder Tales, and where is Theldesia?"

That took Shiroe aback. He adjusted his glasses. "Are you a looper?" he asked. He got a blank look. "What's your opinion on time travel?" he tried again. "Done it frequently?

The Summoner stiffened, eyes wide. "How…? I don't even know you!"

Then, a blonde-haired teen burst out of the mansion. "Haruhiiii," the Bard wailed, latching onto the Summoner shamelessly, "we traveled into a weird place this time and I can't find Kyouya! What are we going to dooooo?"

The Summoner facepalmed. "Dang it, Tamaki," she sighed as the Bard dissolved into theatrical sobbing. Then she pulled him up and quieted him down by kissing his cheek and putting a hand over his mouth. "Calm down," she said firmly before looking to Shiroe.

"Explain what is going on, please."

Shiroe smiled crookedly. "It's complicated. Luckily, we have a manual."

Later, long after Shirou had gone to help out a friend, Haruhi looked through her abilities list while Tamaki sprawled across the floor, sleeping.

The room they were in looked like something out of a harem from an Arabian fairytale, filled with lush pillows, beautiful Persian rugs, and colorful silken gauze, but Haruhi had long become inured to lavish decorations. She had spent far too many loops in a high school club run by ridiculously rich boys that specialized in appealing to the wallets of equally rich girls.

According to the loop memories, which she had not thought to check until Shiroe reminded her, the 'Ouran Hosts' guild did something similar in Elder Tales. The guild was crewed with people of both genders from the Ouran Academy loops, and Tamaki was the leader.

Both he and Kyouya, whom Haruhi suspected of being in the process of taking over another city, were Awake this loop.

Haruhi blushed at reading the description of one of her home loop abilities. She murmured faintly, "That's really an attribute?"

She flopped back on the cushion behind her. "Of all the things… I mean, really? 'Harem Magnet'?"

1.6 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

Shiroe blinked as he awoke, standing in what appeared to be a passenger car on a train. His usual equipment was replaced with a set of long black robes and what appeared to be a school outfit. He gazed into space for several seconds, attempting to mentally call up his status screen, when the door sliding open ended his concentration. Before him stood an 11 year old boy with brown hair, old glasses and a black scar on his forehead. Shiroe raised his hand in greeting. The boy gave him a raised eyebrow, "Are you a looper?"

Shiroe blinked, "Uh, yeah."

The boy sighed, "Damn...did you cause it?"

Shiroe raised his glasses as a gleam crossed them, "I'm not sure what you mean. Last I remember, I was storing a manuscript in my subspace pocket shortly before the loop was set to end. And then I was here, standing here alone."

The boy crossed his arms and sighed, "Then it probably wasn't you. We better find the one responsible. I'm Harry by the way, Harry Potter."

Shiroe offered his hand to shake, "My name's Kei Shirogane, but most people call me Shiroe. What did you mean earlier by 'did you cause it?'"

Harry took it and the two walked down the train, "Right, new to the Hogwarts loops. Usually when another looper ends up here, someone destroyed their own universe. Yggdrasil doesn't like when that happens, and their loop unravels. Because most admins don't want to send their loopers to Eiken, they send them here if possible."

The two passed by Fred and George Weasley, who were discussing new ideas for their future joke shop. Harry continued after they left the twin's car, "So, how many loops have you done?"

Shiroe tapped his chin. "A few hundred. Yourself?"

Harry shrugged, "Lost track eons ago. I'm one of the original seven loopers, along with Ranma, Naruto, Ichigo, Shinji, Usagi, and Lina."

The two continued talking until they came to the final car, where a navy haired girl with pink and purple highlights had her face buried in her hands, while another girl with silver hair looked at the two boys with mild interest. Harry seemed to recognize them, "Hey Twilight. I assume it was Trixie?"

Twilight nodded. Harry rubbed his forehead and exited, intent on looking to see if other loopers were present and who had been replaced, hopefully not Anko. Trixie followed after him, deciding it was better to give Twilight some room. Twilight removed her hands and looked up, only now noticing the enchanter looper, "Ah, I'm sorry, my name is Twilight Sparkle, I'm from the Equestria loops."

Shiroe gave a small grin, "Shiroe from the Elder Tale Loops. I run a guild called Log Horizon."

He paused for a second as his eyes lit up, "Say, do you know a girl by the name Pinkie?"

Twilight's gloomy attitude faded immediately, excitement taking over, "You know her? She hasn't been awake for the last dozen or so loops! How is she?"

Shiroe took a step back, "Uh, yeah. She replaced Kanami, one of our Tea Party members, and spent much of the loops randomly using the Fairy Rings to travel all over the world to start a worldwide party...at least before she ended up in Japan and restarted the Debauchery Tea Party."

The boy shook his head and chuckled to himself. Noticing Twilight's hesitant expression, Shiroe answered the unasked question, "It's just a name, a hangout where 27 adventurers hung out and completed high level raids on various dungeons and other quests."

He sat down next to her, "Tell me about Equestria. Pinkie's explanation was so long winded I didn't catch any of it in the end...besides that you were ponies."

The two continued chatting for quite awhile as the train moved ever closer to Hogwarts.

1.7

"Wow, you're really a time-looping time-traveler from Earth, Kay-kun?" Kanami asked cheerfully as she walked backwards in front of him, the wind tugging playfully at her black, braided hair.

This loop, Shiroe had replaced the high-level Lander - or 'Ancient' - character called Elias Hackblade, the 'true hero' in the mythos of *Elder Tales* . Now a Blademancer by class and named Kay Whiteblade, he found himself traveling overland from England to Japan in the company of Kanami, a level 90 Monk.

Kanami had organized and lead the Debauchery Tea Party. Shiroe had been part of it, long before the Catastrophe, in his baseline. With her cheerful personality and childlike curiosity, she had only ever cared about making *Elder Tales* fun. Shiroe cared for her deeply enough that he had trouble categorizing it beyond 'respect'. The

Debauchery Tea Party had dissolved after Kanami had moved to another country in real life.

He shook off his melancholy and nodded in response to Kanami's question. "That's right," he agreed. Shiroe had Awakened in the middle of Kanami saving Kay from an immensely strong monster. Kay would have died without Kanami's intervention.

Kanami excelled at interventions, Shiroe thought.

The monster lacked the power to withstand a Looper, of course. Able to circumvent the Ancient limitation, Shiroe had promptly dispatching the monster with a cross-class attack combination. Enchanter spells, Kannagi barriers, and Assassin attacks had combined wonderfully with Kay's Fairy Arts.

Explaining afterwards had come naturally. He knew their companionship would last for only this loop; nevertheless, it eased something inside him to be open with her. He had guessed she would take it in stride, and she had, quite easily.

Twirling around once, Kanami laughed with pure delight. "Wow, you must have seen so much!" she exclaimed with a sincere eagerness. "Do you do explore much? What sort of things have you seen?"

Shiroe thought back to past loops. "There was an amusing incident one time when I was a Kannagi and training my Alchemist abilities. I happened to need rare ingredients," he began the story.

As he spoke, they continued walking together towards Ville Fleurie - Paris, France. Shiroe could only wonder what type of adventure would find Kanami next. He looked forward to every second of it.

Shiroe adjusted his glasses as he stared at the contents on the floor of his office. Placing one hand on a stack of papers and dragonhide leather, both from his subspace pocket, he used a Scribe skill:

Publisher. When he lifted his hand away, there were thirteen high-quality hardcover books left behind.

He traced his fingers over the front cover of the book on the top of the stack. The title proclaimed, ' *The Fairy Rings of Theldesia, Volume 1: Yamato Region* .' No author was listed.

Opening the book, he checked to make sure that it had been created properly from the pages that he had printed back on Earth. For every entry, one page displayed a map chart of Theldesia taken straight from an *Elder Tales* screencap. On the next page, information about the location was listed. Each of the next twelve pages showed four moon phases and listed the destination for every hour of the day. The destination names were paired with the appropriate volume and page number for reference.

In short, he had crafted an encyclopedia-sized Ring travel guide.

Everything appeared to have gone well. Satisfied, Shiroe withdrew more stacks of paper and leather and many sets of ink bottles from his pocket. Applying another Scribe skill, Copy, left him with with enough copies of the original set to fill a large bookcase. He smiled as he stuffed them all into his subspace pocket.

Traveling with Kanami had galvanized Shiroe. Traveling across continents, it was impossible to not appreciate the vastness of Theldesia. Distances being half what they would have been on Earth meant that the world itself had a mere quarter of the surface area of Earth, but that meant nothing when so much of the world was a mob-peppered wilderness and lacked modern forms of transportation.

Travel distances had always limited his actions. Early on in the Theldesia timeline, his most reliable transportation was his gryphon mount. Its average speed never surpassed 40 kilometers per hour, and high-level mobs prevented it from bypassing certain areas.

The Fairy Rings circumvented many of those issues. However, hard-to-find or hard-to-reach locations, potentially dangerous destinations,

and constantly shifting destinations meant that remembering what went where and when an extraordinarily difficult task.

Now Shiroe had mitigated that issue. Moreover, as the books appeared to be proper *Elder Tales* item, no one would suspect something strange if he pulled out a book to reference it.

Shiroe stretched languidly. The entire world of Theldesia was finally open to him. It was truly a shame that his attempts to magic up fixes to the dormant inter-city transport gates had all ended rather… catastrophically.

Really, how was he to have expected that the failed spell's backlash would result in the all of the city's clothing being forcibly unequipped? That was one loop he was glad Akatsuki couldn't remember.

Notes:

1.1: And many a looper new to the LH loop will jealously exclaim, "It has a menu!"

1.2.a: "And a ****ing manual?"

1.2.b: Looper lesson #3: With great power comes great explosions.

1.3: Log out; opt out.

1.4: It's great to have minions.

1.5: Ouran High School Host Club: Where looping might make the canon timeline make sense.

1.6: Slytherin or Ravenclaw? Or Hufflepuff?

1.7: This is not a ship. (If Kanami had one, she'd be Luffy.)

1.8: It was still a better result than another try which ended in random body-swapping.

Chapter 2

AN: Sometimes, the different contributors will use different terms for the same thing (like *Novasphere Pioneers* instead of *Homesteading the Noosphere*) or different spelling variations for the same names (Rundelhous or Rundelhaus; Theldesia or Serdesea).

Thanks to all the different translations, I can't say there is only one correct name unless the source is definite (Krusty is named after the Simpsons' character; Hamelin is a reference to the Pied Piper of Hamelin). If the differences in terms used is too confusing or jarring, let me know; I can start editing everything to a single standard.

2.1 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

It was uncommon that Shiroe would awaken prior to the release date of *Novasphere Pioneers* expansion. Once, he awoke just as he was buying the game. During that loop, he organized a ban on *Elder Tales* and started rumors about how easily it was to hack another person's account and steal their personal information. Unfortunately, the campaign succeeded. The moment *Elder Tales* ' servers shut down, he found himself in Eiken.

Shiroe had learned his lesson and now he found himself once again at the corner game store, buying a copy of *Elder Tales* . This time, he would do something different.

The last thing she remembered, Shiroe had convinced Rundelhaus Code to join his guild, Log Horizon, and had been returning to their strategic command at Midraunt Equestrian Park. Moments later, she opened her eyes to Akihabara on the Day of the Apocalypse, male once again, with strange changes to her status screen.

Eventually, she met up with Shiroe again, but he was different this time around. The tactician held two rapiers on either of his hips, one made of Adamantine that appeared forged in dragon fire. The other was windforged by the Fae creatures and bestowed with the ability to bind its prey. His species was even changed to the Wolf Hair Tribe. Hopefully, he had one hell of an explanation.

2.2.a (Detective Ethan Redfield)

Akatsuki looked at the orange-colored appearance-changing potion with disdain. Shiroe couldn't blame her. "Have you tried mixing in a painkiller potion?"

The girl nodded. "I don't have a high enough Alchemy subclass."

Shiroe sighed. Having used that potion a couple times himself when looping as villains, the effects make you feel like all your bones are breaking at once. Shiroe had some minor skill in Alchemy after studying under Snape, but only enough to make him level 30. Finding a painless version of that potion was another project to work on in addition to his *Elder Tales* Encyclopedia. He'd be busy for quite a few loops, it seemed.

2.2.b (Detective Ethan Redfield)

"Akatsuki?"

"Yes, Milord?"

"Would you mind trying this?"

The female ninja took a look at the potion, then downed it in a single gulp. Her body grew numb and her bones crunched for a few

minutes; then the numbness faded. She looked to Shiroe, who had a rueful expression. "Back to the drawing board."

The ninja looked to the mirror and paled, "Shiroe, why am I a Fox Tail?"

"Akatsuki, would you mind trying this?"

The ninja took the potion and gave it a dubious look. A few minutes later after drinking the potion, her eyes twitched in irritation at Shiroe, who had gone pale in terror. The male ninja drew his tanto and lunged at Shiroe.

"Akatsuki-"

"Yes, yes. give me the potion already. You can't do worse than making me a man again," she grunted in frustration. This time, her bones did not crunch, but rather her body gave off light until she was a bright as the sun. Moments later, the light faded and her eyes opened. Shiroe's mouth was gaping… Not a good sign. She turned to the mirror, and squeaked. A navy blue Pegasus with purple eyes looked back with a bewildered expression. Shiroe pulled out a notebook, "So adding unicorn horn and a some horse tail will-"

A hoof slammed into his face, sending him flying across the room.

2.3

Amidst a forest of trees that reached for the clouds, Akatsuki darted through the air. One Gust Step took her through a patch of sunlight that had filtered through the canopy. Still in midair, she waited the precious moment it took for the skill to recharge, then adapted her stance to activate the skill again. Pushing against the wide trunk of another tree, she kicked off into the air.

A few days' travel by horseback away from any Adventurer city, she was the only human around for kilometers. The small Lander town where she spent her nights did not have anyone high-leveled enough to survive long off the road. In *Elder Tales* , it would have been a staging point for quests. She was filling what requests of theirs she could anyways. It was only polite, and it did not inconvenience her.

Back in Akiba, she had told Shiroe, "I plan to go out to the mountains to train alone, my lord. I may be gone for the rest of the loop."

"Planning to sit under waterfalls and fight bears?" he had joked. More seriously, he had added, "Please keep in touch, Akatsuki-san. If you need me, I will go to you."

It had left her feeling simultaneously warm and ashamed: warm that he cared, ashamed that she might not be strong enough to survive on her own.

It was not a rational feeling. Even at level 90 or beyond, some monsters required at least a party of six to defeat; the most difficult required a full raid, 16 parties. A level 90 Adventurer could not expect to come away alive from soloing a level 90 party boss.

A Looper, however, could surpass all limits. This could not be done while playing as a normal Adventurer; EXP gain stopped at level 100, the Adventurer's level cap. But a Looper could break that by applying "experience" from previous loops.

Neither Shiroe nor Akatsuki preferred to live that way. Others could see one's level on their status screen. A high level only meant questions and suspicion from Landers and other Adventurers both. Besides, though the experience was justly earned, using it felt like exploiting a glitch in a game.

Akatsuki was training in the mountains, still at level 90, because she was searching for a different sort of strength.

Even deep in thought, her body continued to move. She automatically calculated the best route and worked towards her goal. No monsters had appeared yet. She jumped to another branch as her mind worked on other issues.

From what Akatsuki had learned of loops, the Theldesia loop had unusual quirks. Not only were two worlds involved in the loop, but the loop had an unstable length. While it frequently began on the eve of the Catastrophe, sometimes it instead started right after the transition instead. Sometimes it began much earlier than that, months or years in advance.

Compared to that, the endings had much more predictability. The most common ending dates, according to Shiroe, were just after the invasion of the Sand Leaf Peninsula was repelled or just after the Libra Festival. Living one baseline-variety loop to the latter end had led Akatsuki to her current state.

Akatsuki stopped to rest on one branch, checking her surroundings more thoroughly with her enhanced Tracker senses. The bark beneath her hands felt rough and chilled compared to her blood-warmed body.

She pushed off. There was still time before she reached her destination.

Akatsuki called Shiroe her lord and swore to serve him, but she honestly felt that even the baseline Minori did a better job of it simply by helping Shiroe with paperwork. Akatsuki had no skill at that or at planning as Shiroe did. Even following his orders dutifully, she often did not understand his requests until after he reached his goal.

She called herself a ninja, but her combat ability could not be called top tier. Her equipment and skills also lacked the edge that others had, as she had never participated in any raid and earned the rare drops they gave. In truth, she was quite average in terms of equipment and her skills' levels because of that.

Akatsuki could not do much about those at the moment. Either she would save up on her own for better Production-class equipment, or she would do raids in a loop with an early enough start date. However, she could work on something important that could not be done in the game.

As she used Gust Step again and again, part of her concentration focused on the feel of the mana in her body. Not being from a magical class, the effort involved was not inconsiderable. Trying to focus on the minute changes was like trying to see grains of sand through a foggy glass.

She refused to give up.

Before the end of the loop, Akatsuki vowed to learn at least one Overskill and ideally several. Like Shiroe's use of a contract to change a Lander into an Adventurer, Akatsuki would develop her own unique skills.

She heard the sounds of large, noisy animals. They were still at a distance. She used Gust Step again, thinking back to something Shiroe had told her.

He had said, "It's easy for some of the races to forget that we aren't Earth humans anymore. Our stats can easily take us beyond that of a Terran. Then, we have skills that take us even further than our stats.

"But how much further can we improve if we try? If we really learn to use the power in our bodies, physical and magical, instead of relying upon the skills of our race and class?" He had scratched at his cheek sheepishly. "It's something to think about, though . Why, are you interested?"

Why wouldn't she be interested? Akatsuki wanted Shiroe to be able to depend on her.

Most Adventurers created an Overskill through combining combat and sometimes non-combat skills in new ways, reinforced with real-world fighting skills or occasionally near-instinctive mana manipulation. Akatsuki had first thought that Overskills were all about expertise. That wasn't completely wrong.

But, more than that, Overskills were about being boring, about using the basics in ways that were obvious to anyone that saw beyond the cage of game logic. Low-level Adventurers invented new Overskills all of the time, as when Rundelhous controlled the strength of his fireballs. Only a high-level player had the conceit to call such an action an Overskill.

Relying solely on herself in an area full of level 80 and above enemies, Akatsuki had no choice but to throw her familiar habits away. If she did not learn, did not adapt, it would only be a matter of time before she awoke back in the cathedral.

Akatsuki looked down. She had reached her destination. A swift mountain river rushed through the trees. Mobs called Larcenous Chitters, black squirrel-like creatures wearing belts, bags, and swords, darted through the branches between her and the ground. There had to be over two dozen of the meter-long - not including the luxurious tail - tree rodents, and all were level 85.

The battle ahead would depend on speed. She drew her kodachi and unleashed an Accel Fang on the closet Chitter.

The link between her mana and her movements became a little clearer with every battle.

For Shiroe and for herself, she would win.

2.4

"Are you sure leaving Naotsugu in Akiba was a good idea, my lord?" Akatsuki asked from behind Shirou as their gryphon beat its wings through the sky. Shiroe had given her a gryphon flute from a previous loop, but she had not wanted to ride separately.

Shiroe threw a reassuring look over his shoulder. "Almost certainly. He's done well helping Maryelle before. If he follows my instructions and keeps in contact, the situation in Akiba will improve and stabilize."

Akatsuki looked at him like a specimen under a microscope. It made him sweat. "You have neglected important details," she concluded. "My lord, you do not plan to return to Akiba this loop, do you?"

Shiroe winced slightly. He knew he should have said that earlier. She could read him well despite all of the loops he had lived without her. He admitted, "Not for quite some time."

Because she trusted him, Akatsuki asked no further questions. "Understood, my lord."

Shiroe stayed quiet for a few minutes. "...Akatsuki?"

"Yes, my lord?"

"Could you just call me 'Shiroe'?"

Akatsuki's face went blank.

Hastily, Shiroe clarified, "At least when it's just the two of us? You have a very long life ahead of you now, and I don't want you to see yourself as indebted to me for its entirety. I need a friend more than I need a follower."

Her cheeks burned red.

What had he said to make her mad? "Sorry, you can call me whatever you want."

Akatsuki buried her face in Shiroe's back. Her shoulders were shaking. Shiroe worried until he realized that she was trying to hold in laughter.

After she regained enough control to sit up straight again, she met his eyes with a soft smile. "If that is how you feel, I do not mind using 'Shiroe'."

Shiroe, finding himself suddenly unable to speak, nodded and turned away. If his face appeared slightly flushed, it could be blamed on the wind.

If one had the money to buy the guild center, the cathedral, and the markets, making a criminal organization come in line could be extraordinarily easy.

As Shiroe had explained to Demikas earlier, "It's pretty simple. If you don't clean up your act, living here will be made thoroughly unpleasant. If you continue to misbehave, you get banned from the cathedral. Do you want to test what that does to your ability to resurrect?"

Within a day of their arrival, Shiroe and Akatsuki had become the de facto rulers of Susukino. Nyanta and Serara had been sent back to Akiba through a Fairy Ring route that Shiroe had plotted out for them.

Back in Akiba, Naotsugu and the Crescent Moon Alliance had organized the guilds into the Round Table Council and were already working out plans for mob population control, outreach to the Landers, and new experiments with crafting.

All Shiroe had to concentrate on was reforming the thick-headed PK guild of Brigandia. They had the potential to be good people, really; they had just let the lack of apparent consequences send them on a power trip.

At present, Demikas was staring at Shiroe like he had just grown another head. "You… What? Landers? You want me to go protect their village?"

Shiroe leaned back, casually signaling Akatsuki to take the lead of the conversation. Dealing with petite women who could kick his ass threw Demikas off balance.

In a quiet tone that still sounded extraordinarily threatening, Akatsuki said, "As you are entirely too deep in denial to admit that the Landers are as alive as we are, perhaps you should think of it as a quest with tangible rewards. The Landers will supply us with what we need if we keep the mobs away from them. If you lose the supply line or hurt the Landers, my lord Shiroe will be very unhappy with you.

"If Shiroe is unhappy with you," Akatsuki continued with absolute politeness, "I will regretfully ensure that you empathize."

Shiroe used that opening to re-enter the conversation. "I am sure we won't have that problem, Akatsuki. After all, aren't you going to travel with them to be on hand if they need help?"

Akatsuki nodded. "That is so." Her smile was, perhaps, less than comforting.

2.5

Akatsuki stabbed the wild boar and stared at the result with a bemused scrunch of her brows.

"What? This is no longer a game. So why did it do that?" Akatsuki exclaimed, pointing at the dissipating puff of smoke that had replaced the animal. Items and gold fell to the ground where it had been, and then a menu notification popped up informing her what

she had earned. When she touched it, the items and gold disappeared; they had been automatically placed in her inventory.

Shiroe sighed. "I thought so. It's one of *those* loops," he replied while checking something in his own menu. "This is a variant that happens occasionally. While the world is still real, some parts are treated more like a game. You might have noticed you don't actually need to wear your Magical Bag of Holding; the inventory system's mechanics work more like that of the subspace pocket. Also, the drops are granted almost exactly like they were in the MMO."

Akatsuki contemplatively rested her chin on a fist. "That sounds convenient. It's nice to not have to butcher out kills ourselves." She had become very proficient at it, but it remained a bloody, unpleasant job.

Wearing a small grimace, Shiroe shook his head. "Ah, it's not really."

"Because…?"

"In other loops, an experienced hunter can gain more meat and useful parts by doing the work by hand. Also, this makes the subspace pocket and inventory a little," he pressed his thumb and forefinger together lightly, "too similar to be automatically differentiated."

Akatsuki shivered as a chill traveled up her spine despite the warm sunlight shining into the clearing. Flatly, she said, "That means that we might drop items from our subspace pocket if we get killed, doesn't it."

Shiroe nodded.

"There's no way to prevent it?" Akatsuki persisted in asking.

"There is," Shiroe responded to her relief, "but," and the relief vanished, "it takes some mental gymnastics and you can never be sure if you are doing them correctly until you die and nothing drops."

She cursed. "In other words, don't get killed?"

"Don't get killed," he agreed.

"Good job," Shiroe said mildly as they walked through the guild center, "but did you have to do that?"

Akatsuki - after looking about herself to make sure Henrietta was not in the area - radiated innocent ignorance. "I have no idea what you mean, my lord. My attempt at separating my subspace pocket from my inventory clearly failed."

"And so what you dropped was..?"

"Life deciding to give the bastards what they deserved," she replied without pity, standing straight with her hands clasped behind her back. The PKers had been targeting some kids barely older than Touya and Minori.

"Hm." Shiroe held back a laugh. "That does explain the volatile explosive," he acknowledged.

"Did they drop anything decent?" Akatsuki inquired as if discussing nothing of consequence.

PKers rarely had decent equipment. Artifact-class items could not be removed from the possession of their first user; Phantasmal-class drops automatically tied themselves to their finder. With PKing able to steal Production-class equipment at best, many had derided PKers as useless parasites even before the Catastrophe.

Though her 'killers' had reached level 90, Akatsuki did not expect they had anything that would have impressed her even in the baseline.

"Actually, they did." Shiroe gave a small, smug smile.

At her raised eyebrows, he explained, "Nothing we could use, but I found a group of kids nearby who appreciated them."

2.6

Shiroe Awoke in a mansion of some sort, holding an elegant silver tray with a bowl of soup upon it. A sickly teenaged girl rested in a bed before hand.

He checked to see if he could open his menu screen. It did not appear. However, he could still feel his powers, as he could if he were still on Earth.

A fused loop was the most likely explanation.

The girl looked at him with open concern. "Klahadore? Are you all right?"

Shiroe blinked and drug up his in-loop memories. He was Klahadore, a butler to a young orphan named Kaya. But Klahadore was actually an evil, cruel, and murderous pirate captain named Kuro who was trying to steal Kaya's fortune.

Shiroe wasn't interested in following through at all.

He carefully set the tray down. With a slight bow, he said, "I have something to admit to you, Miss Kaya."

The head of Usopp, the village idiot, popped up in the window. The boy wielded a slingshot. "Kaya! You have to get away from him! He's a pirate!" Usopp exclaimed, shooting a smoke bomb at Shiroe. As he fired, Shiroe thought Usopp said, "Shit, he's not-"

Shiroe reflexively countered with a Pulse Bullet spell, striking the smoke bomb with a small orb of magic and knocking it back out the window. Both Kaya and Usopp stared at him with hanging jaws.

Apparently, having strange abilities in this world was a pretty good indication of someone's status as a pirate; Kaya pulled her blankets closer around her in fear. "Klahadore, is it true?"

"Ack, I was wrong!" flailed Usopp. "Sorry, I'd just Awoken, and I mistook you for someone else." He paused. "Er. You aren't a bad guy, are you?"

Shiroe rethought the explanation that he had been about to give. This world seemed to deal well with the ludicrous, from what he could remember. "No, I am not," he replied easily. "Don't worry about it. I understand how confusing Awakening can make the world. I feel as clumsy as an Anchor just about every time."

Kaya shot Shiroe a bewildered look, though Usopp looked relieved. Kaya asked, "Then why do you have Devil Fruit powers?"

Shiroe shook his head. "No, that was magic," he said bluntly.

Kaya's eyes widened. "Really?" she squeaked while Usopp gave him a look of warning.

"Yes," Shiroe confirmed. Then he spun his story. "You see, I am an Enchanter from a world called Theldesia. One day, an unexpected event transported me to this one. I did not want to attract the attention of either pirates or the Marines with my powers, and in the end your father was kind enough to hire me on as a butler."

Usopp relaxed as Shiroe's half-truth skirted any hints of time travel.

"I have finally given up on finding a way home." Shiroe grimaced as he spoke. "I am told I bear an unfortunate resemblance to a supposedly executed pirate captain. Not everyone is convinced he is truly dead, which would explain Usopp's worry on your behalf."

Kaya had released her death grip on her covers. She looked at Usopp gratefully. "Oh, Usopp," she sighed, "that was brave of you."

She looked at him sternly. "If he had been a real pirate, you could have gotten hurt!"

"Um, well," Usopp said lamely, blushing and looking down at the ground.

Kaya turned her gaze to Shiroe. "So you aren't a bad person."

Shiroe nodded.

"And… you are really a magician?" she hesitantly asked.

In response, Shiroe materialized a sorcerer's staff in his hand. He performed a courtly bow. "Shirogane Kei Shiroe, at your service," he said, purposefully changing his name to be more in line with the world's standard. "Please, call me Shiroe."

Later, Shiroe had made his excuses to Kaya and searched for Usopp. The other was waiting for him not far from the mansion.

"You look different," Usopp noted with surprise.

Shiroe nodded. His hair had returned to its usual messy hairstyle and slightly different features. "I took an appearance-changing potion. I don't want to look anything like the man I replaced. I could do without that baggage."

"Can't blame you there." He rubbed his head. "So, I'm Usopp of the One Piece loops. Our Anchor is Luffy. Nice to meet you."

"I am Shiroe, the Anchor of the *Elder Tales* loops. I'll be in your care." He gave Usopp a friendly nod. "Do you have any advice?"

Usopp crossed his arms. "Never heard of that loop. Huh. You being an Anchor means that ours might not be around. First thing's first, we wait around until your - er, Kuro's - pirate crew shows up and take them out. Afterwards..." Usopp tilted his head as he thought. "I'm not

used to Kuro being good. What you should do next… Hey, how about you join *my* pirate crew?"

Shiroe hadn't expected that. "What."

Shiroe clung to the mast of the Going Merry as it surged up Reverse Mountain.

Straw hat firmly held to his head, Luffy stood on the prow, guffawing loudly. "Hey, Shiroe!" he called back, "you ready to do it?"

Carefully peeling one arm off the wood, Shiroe gave Luffy a thumbs up.

"Ha, awesome!" Luffy cheered.

Someone else groaned, "Oh, no." It might have been Nami.

With his free hand, Shiroe planted his staff into the deck of the Going Merry. Then he hit the ship with a pre-planned selection of defense spells. For the next few minutes, the ship would not break; the crew would stay safely attached to the deck.

Finally, Shiroe unleashed as many different movement buffs as he knew, and Luffy did *something* Shiroe couldn't quantify.

The ship broke the sound barrier.

"SONIC MERRY-BOOM!" Luffy roared in exultation as the ship shot into the sky. Most of the others' shouts were considerably less joyous.

Part of Shiroe could not help but think, ' *I'm weak against that sort of personality, aren't I?* ' The rest of him simply enjoyed the view for the few moments it lasted.

Afterward, one could say his heart felt light: they experienced momentary weightlessness as they plummeted down towards the

Grand Line.

2.7 (Detective Ethan Redfield; inspired by idea by Wyldehorse)

Hamelin had to go. It was a blighted guild that stained Akiba, and it had to be removed every single loop. Certainly, if he had 5 million gold in his account, he would often buy up the guild building and immediately ban every member of Hamelin from entry. Other times, he'd buy up the cathedral and go assassin's creed on them. Of course, he wouldn't leave them dead. Upon getting the last member of Hamelin, he would allow them access for just long enough to kick them out of town upon resurrection. If they returned, he'd make it permanent...for that loop anyway.

This time he wanted to try something different. Black Knight Isaac sat across a table from the "new" player Shiroe had created just for that loop. He was a Werecat Cleric, with a merchant level of 90. The knight looked at Shiroe and smirked, "Your invitation intrigued me, since you sent me enough EXP pots for every member of my guild. I assume you want a trade agreement?"

Shiroe nodded, "I am aware that you buy EXP pots from the guild Hamelin. I began playing *Elder Tales* 8 years ago. Since then, I have built up my supply of EXP pots, never having used one and further buying every spare pot I could obtain from every player and now have a sizable stock. I wish to start selling it exclusively to you. Furthermore, I will undercut Hamelin's prices by a sizable margin."

Isaac gave a nasty grin, "Interesting. Tell me then, why would you buy so many EXP pots and never do anything with them?"

Shiroe deadpanned, "I've lived through the Apocalypse once in the form of a time loop, and I knew 8 years ago that the game would evolve into an entire world where EXP pots were rare. I could then sell them at a premium and make a killing."

Isaac barked a laugh, "Well, if you want to keep the reason why, who am I to look a gift horse in the mouth."

Shiroe shrugged, "Ok, here's the truth. Gathering EXP pots was a hobby since I'm a pack rat. I always turned a profit and leveled up my Merchant skills, but was never truly interested in fighting. Also, I bought the pots from other players since...I kinda always thought of it as cheating. It's like taking steroids for a baseball game."

Isaac's eyes narrowed, "So what changed that made you start selling your inventory?"

Shiroe's glasses gleamed for a moment, "Three reasons. First, the Apocalypse made it necessary that the combat guilds grow stronger. But you don't know if the next time you die at the cathedral you will respawn. You'll need all the advantages you can get, and I want to escape this world one day. Who knows if the guardian system will hold up forever."

Black glasses held up two fingers, "Second, I hear rumors about Susukino from some of my friends up there. The guild, Brigandia, is tearing the city apart, destroying stands in the street, breaking bars and inns, and finally PKing players as they attempt to flee the city. I wish protection in case something similar occurs in Akiba."

A third finger rose, "Finally, I know Hamelin is holding new members of *Elder Tales* in their guild hostage, taking their EXP pots and selling it to your guild and other players. I wish this to end."

Isaac frowned, "How do you plan on doing this?"

Shiroe smirked, "Hamelin takes the players out for raids for crafting materials. I want you to PK their players and protect the new players as they quit their guild. This will cut them off from access to their source."

Isaac scoffed as he rose from his seat, "Why should I care? Hamelin would have a never-ending supply, while you'll eventually run out-"

Shiroe held out five fingers, "I have a stock exceeding 100,000 EXP pots by a large margin. Hamelin has up to 30 new players trapped in their guild hall. Tell me, would you rather have your entire guild able to be levelling up for a year, or only 30? Do the math, 30 EXP pots a day for a year is under 11,000 EXP pots, and I have well over 100,000 right now."

With that logic, Isaac returned to his seat. Shiroe knew he had Isaac's support. Even now, Akatsuki was organizing a similar deal with D.D.D. Hamelin soon collapsed under the weight of two guilds hunting their organization to the ground. Whenever they left the city, they would be PKed on sight. Players that bought supplies from Hamelin were targeted as well by lesser PKers. Soon, no one would buy from them, and they were forced to disband and leave Akiba.

2.8 (inspired by idea by Wyldehorse)

Shiroe tapped his quill against the page. His habit of stuffing the contents of his inventory into his subspace pocket had built up an excess of his highest quality ink and paper supplies; not every loop reached a point where a special contract was required. He could make a few stacks of the contract now.

It still wasn't enough to grant Adventurer status to even an entire city, not if he did it on an individual basis.

His countenance brightened as he had an idea. It was untested, but his Looper menu itself proved that such things had malleability.

The League of Freedom Cities Eastal, the zone in which Akiba was located, was formed of 24 different fiefdoms: city-states with noble families who ruled over the surrounding areas.

The nobles had a few regularly scheduled gatherings at the zone known as the Ancient Palace of Eternal Ice. Currently, they were in

the middle of a meeting in regards to incorporating Akiba. Shiroe, Krusty, and Michitaka, as members of the Round Table Council of Akiba, served as the ambassadorial party.

Before the meeting, Shiroe had discussed his plans with the Round Table Council. They had questioned whether such an action was truly possible and whether it was a good idea, but in the end had supported his decision. He had built up goodwill with how he had brought Akiba out of its depression and handled situations such as mob population control.

They were calling him 'the Black-Hearted Hero' this loop. Hearing the epithet embarrassed him somewhat, but his reputation served him well in political situations.

Now, the nobles reacted to the offer he had put before them.

There was disbelief and clamoring chaos. They quieted down when Sergead, the aging Duke of Maihama and current head of the League, stood up. He did not need his mantle or crown to impress his regal nobility upon the room.

"Explain your claim. We must know what you are offering," he told Shiroe.

Shiroe stood in response and bowed slightly. "It is as I said. I possess the power to bestow the status of 'Adventurer' on Landers by contract. It requires such rare ink and paper that I am the only known Scribe with access to such supplies.

"However, because of the nature of the status, Landers can only receive the benefits if they draw on the authority of one who is already an Adventurer. Individual contracts would be effective, but I do not have enough supplies for the entire nobility."

That was a lie, but no one else had to know.

"If I write a new treaty or constitution binding the League to Akiba in friendship, and if the leader of each city agrees to sign it, then I can make every single Lander in Eastal into an Adventurer.

"The benefits are obvious, and the terms are negotiable. The choice is up to you."

The next loop, Akatsuki was Awake. "I think I'm going to take a break this loop. Can you handle things?" he asked after she finished drinking her potion.

"Certainly." Knowing Shiroe as she did, she had to ask, "What did you do last loop to bring about this exhaustion?"

Shiroe rubbed his neck sheepishly. "I ended up turning Eastal into a constitutional oligarchy and ended up its first prime minister." He laughed awkwardly.

She stared at him, and then moved towards the door. "I am off to Susukino," stated Akatsuki levelly. "Please apply yourself to doing absolutely nothing, or else you may accidentally conquer the world."

Chapter Notes

2.1: Shiroe has class. *stupid pun*

2.2: He deserved that.

2.3: Take one looping Akatsuki, add canonical character development, and stir.

2.4: Quest Complete. Relationship (Akatsuki): +1 Closeness. New Base: Susukino.

2.5: NHK worked hard to reduce violence in the anime. Good job, NHK; now more kids want to buy the novels.

2.6: One Piece fused loop. Shiroe replaces a villain with glasses who makes intricate long-term plans. That doesn't sound like him at all, right?

2.7: Not the easiest way to do it, but hurrah for karmic vengeance.

2.8: The perils of paperwork.

Chapter 3

AN: If anyone is curious, I do accept loop submissions. Posting loop snippets in the Spacebattles thread from which these came is recommended but not strictly necessary.

3.1

In this world, the MMORPG known as *Elder Tales* did not exist. This was the first fact that Akatsuki grasped as she considered her memories of her time before Awakening. Currently, she sat at her computer… awaiting for the release of an expansion for the MMORPG known as *Alfheim Online* ?

She reached for her in-loop memories. Set in a world where nine factions of fairies fought against the rule of the tyrant king Oberon, the game utilized a complicated classless system and had initially encouraged competition between races.

With the release of the next expansion, *An Incarnating Radius* , the final raid against Oberon would open at the top of the world tree, Yggdrasil, and past that an entirely new area could be found. The few details released hinted that interracial cooperation would become necessary.

Akatsuki tensed as the update rolled out, half-expecting to be transported to the world of Alfheim. She breathed a sigh of relief as nothing happened, though it made her wonder what this loop would bring.

A Spriggan swordsman dressed in black struck the final blow against Fairy King Oberon.

As he died, the light of teleportation enveloped all members of the raid party, and then…

Akatsuki found herself physically standing in the central plaza of Aincrad's Town of Beginnings. This time, she had her female form instead of her character's male one, but her skin had the purple tinge of an Imp. Moreover, she could feel the wings waiting to spring forth into being on her back.

Most of the 96-man raid team panicked, asking each other "Where are we?" and "What happened?" They were loud and distracting, but it was a scene Akatsuki had watched many times before.

Akatsuki paid heed only to those who held their composure or had knowing looks. There were few: a teen Spriggan in black, a blue-haired Undine child, and a redheaded Salamander knight - Naotsugu?

He met her gaze with shock and then recognition. She gestured towards an out-of-the-way alley, and he nodded. They made their way through the crowds. The Spriggan, having collected the Undine, saw their movement and followed.

Naotsugu did not notice. "Akatsuki, why were we back on Earth? Why aren't we on Theldesia?" he demanded to know.

"Is this your first loop?" asked the Undine child curiously. Naotsugu yelped and turned the face the two that had snuck up behind him.

Akatsuki nodded, calmly confirming, "I believe so. My lord Shiroe, the Anchor of the *Elder Tales* loops, has not mentioned Naotsugu's presence in our loops." She opened her menu with a quick gesture and checked its contents. "Naotsugu, check the Looper submenu. There is a help file that explains the basics."

He gave her a strange look but obeyed. His eyes rounded in surprise at what he saw, but his eyes tracked back and forth over a page the others could not see.

The Spriggan, bemused, opened his own menu. "...If this is another world, why does it have a menu?"

As she went through her own menu to check available options, Akatsuki replied, "The magic system of Theldesia includes such a menu, though we are not sure why. In *Elder Tales* , we viewed the world of Theldesia as a game in which we played until the day we were transported to it."

Naotsugu shook his head as he finished reading the introductory portion of the manual. "Damn, this is a lot to take in," he said, which earned sympathetic nods from the other three.

"It will be all right," the Undine piped up cheerfully. "Papa is strong. He's looped a lot longer than I have. My name is Yui!" she introduced herself.

"'Papa'?" asked both Akatsuki and Naotsugu with disbelieving looks towards the Spriggan. He didn't look more than twice her age.

The Spriggan laughed a little. "She's my precocious little sister this loop. In my baseline, Yui-chan was an AI who Asuna and I, adopted while we were trapped in a virtual MMO turned death game called *Sword Art Online* . I'm Kirito, by the way."

As an aside, he added, "Asuna is my wife, though they would have considered us too young for it in the baseline. We used SAO's marriage system. I'm not sure if she is looping this time or not. Titania is not always her, but she has been Titania before."

Thinking back to some of Oberon's catchphrases, Naotsugu blurted, "Married to a creep like Oberon?"

Kirito winced. "Yeah, he's always an as-" he looked at Yui, "-stinker." His stomach rumbled. "If this is anything like SAO, we'll get called together for an announcement before anything important happens. For now, do you want to grab some food and go explore?"

Naotsugu and Akatsuki traded glances, and Naotsugu shrugged. "Sure, why not? I hope it's not like the normal Theldesian food."

Akatsuki shuddered at her recall of the taste(lessness).

"I pray it is not," she replied at the same time Kirito asked with great worry, "What?"

Kirito and Yui looked down mournfully at the sandwiches they had purchased at the 'NPC'-run restaurant. Rather than fairies, humans populated Aincrad. Much like Theldesia's Landers, their day-to-day living was done with the aid of their menus.

Much like Theldesia, the menu-made food tasted like mushy rice crackers. Their tea tasted like water.

Yui was practically crying. "Papa, I want Mama's food," she lamented as she hung her head.

Kirito sighed, smoothing down her blue hair. "Guess I'll have to dig into my backup supplies. I have some instant food in my subspace pocket."

Naotsugu shook his head. "Without a cooking skill, I bet you wouldn't be able to do more than boil water. If this world really is like Theldesia, the stuff will turn to inedible sludge when you try and cook it. We couldn't even make salads."

Kirito flinched, stricken by horror. His stomach groaned.

Akatsuki kindly offered, "Perhaps I can cook something if we can obtain a facility and ingredients. My Chef subclass is currently at level 48."

Kirito and Yui looked at her as if she was an angel fresh from heaven.

Naotsugu joked, "Oh, so you're training yourself to be a good wife for Shi-"

Akatsuki smacked her hand against the ends of her tableware, and a spoon flipped through the air and hit Naotsugu's forehead at high speed. "Do you two mind if I throw objects at this strange man?" she asked Kirito and Yui afterwards. Yui giggled at their antics.

Naotsugu just laughed as he rubbed his forehead. "Still crushing on him, are-"

A steak knife imbedded itself in the wood of the wall near his head.

They had arrived in the Town of Beginnings early in the morning. As the day passed, players in the town of Arrun at the base of the world tree continued to use a newly-activated transport gate to reach the Town of Beginnings. People wanted to find out what was going on, but of course no one knew anything.

A forcefield around the Town of Beginnings prevented the fairies from passing through, but the humans of Aincrad had no trouble at all.

Then, at dusk, the sensation of teleporting overtook everyone again. The specter of a giant, robed figure appeared in the middle of the town center. Later, the four loopers would discover that the same happened to players all throughout Alfheim.

The illusory figure removed the robe, revealing a woman as beautiful as any model. Complimenting her elaborate, white gown, a tiara rested across her brow, and she had pointed fairy ears with elaborate jewelry decorating them. Six snow-white fairy wings stretched to a magnificent span behind her.

"That's not Mama," Yui whispered to the other loopers with hurt disappointment.

The illusion spoke. "Greetings, Fairies of Alfheim. The bodies which you puppetted from your home on the other world have finally, successfully, defeated my oaf of a husband, the Fairy King Oberon. For that, I wish to thank you.

"Unfortunately, with his dying breath, Oberon activated a spell and a geas. First, the spell transported you from your world and placed you into these bodies. Make no mistake, your previous forms no longer exist.

"Second, the geas is this: If any of you wish to return home, you must reach the 100th floor of my castle and defeat what you find there. If you do not wish to return home, then you are welcome to stay in Alfheim; however, know this: your lives will become infinitely more pleasant if you reach the 100th floor. Limitations, such as those on flight, will be removed."

Titania's countenance became more severe. "Also, know this: The world in which you are is real. The people of the world are as alive as you are. As such, if you behave in ways that violate common decency, you will be punished appropriately. I have ensured that people will properly reincarnate if killed; nevertheless, murderers will be severely punished. Even temporary death is not without consequences."

She tilted her as if listening to someone. "My secretary wished to advise any children ages 15 or younger to seek out the librarian in the Town of Beginnings in the ground floor of Aincrad if they wish to avoid battle."

Titania swept her gaze across her audience. "Count this as your tutorial. I have presented you with your challenge. It is your problem if you cannot succeed." With that, the figure vanished.

Silence struck the town momentarily before the crowds erupted once again. The loopers, by unspoken agreement, moved to leave before the rest even thought about doing so.

By the time they reached the town gate, the situation appeared to be calming down, but no one followed their path. "Well, at least it's not a complete death game," Kirito said optimistically as he walked through the stone arch. This time, no force field stopped him. "It might be worth it to play this one through."

Yui looked much less relaxed, but she observed, "With the queen imposing a universal law, the players' mental stability should remain strong overall. The town was not in danger of rioting, and most will move out of depression and into acceptance relatively quickly."

"Man, your guys' world is making Theldesia sound like a paradise," Naotsugu voiced what Akatsuki was also thinking.

A sunny voice interrupted, "We tried improving the situation here as best we could. Shiroe is a fantastic bureaucrat."

Standing beyond the gate was a young Puca, a teenaged girl with long, straight hair reminiscent of Yui's. Next to her stood a tall, silver-haired Leprechaun with wire-rim glasses. The quality of their equipment was good but not spectacular, as well as quite fitting the racial stereotypes of music or mechanics.

While Akatsuki's heart lifted at the sight of the Leprechaun, Yui shouted, "Mama!" and ran to the Puca, who swept Yui up into a hug. "You were using a disguise, weren't you!" Kirito walked to join them, eager but sedate.

Asuna gave Yui a gentle kiss on her forehead. "Sorry," Asuna apologized to her family, "having people able to identify me would have been trouble."

Akatsuki and Naotsugu jogged towards the Leprechaun. "Shiroe! Good to see you!" Naotsugu said, giving Shiroe a friendly pound on the back that knocked the Leprechaun off balance. "This looping business is crazy. Where've you been?"

Shiroe smiled wryly. "I'm glad you're looping, Naotsugu." He gestured at the world around them. "This one could have been a hard one, but luckily Asuna and I were slotted into positions of significant authority. As the queen, Asuna owns all of Aincrad and Alfheim - anyone who buys a property is technically only leasing it."

Asuna set Yui down with another hug and took up the conversation. "That meant that I could set all safety levels, re-enable the resurrection in towns, and stop Oberon from resurrecting, like was his plan." Her voice was thick with distaste. "If he had his way, you would have been facing Shiroe on the 99th floor, myself on the 100th, and himself as an extra, unbeatable boss afterwards." She grimaced. "Oberon's a sick bas-" she looked at Yui, "-person even when he isn't Sugou."

"That would be her ex-fiancé," Kirito added by way of explanation. He kept one arm wrapped around Asuna's shoulders, and she leaned into him while they both rested hands on Yui.

"Huh," said Naotsugu. It all sounded complicated to him. He wasn't an idiot, but Shiroe was the one who thrived on plots and politics. "So, are you two going to travel with us while your castle runs itself or something?"

Shiroe shook his head regretfully. "We are taking the night off, but we do have to be back at the castle by morning. Our current appearances are temporary disguises - we have to go back to being Alfs to run the world."

Naotsugu cycled those words through his head a few times. 'Run the world.' If it wasn't Shiroe saying them, he reasoned, it would not make sense.

Asuna groaned. "All the paperwork, and organizing, and delegating. I can't wait until someone makes it up to the 100th floor and breaks the geas. I would rather send everyone home."

"As would I," Shiroe agreed, the moonlight glinting off his glasses as he gave a scary smile, "but I do wonder how my skills measure up for the job."

"That might be fun," Asuna agreed warmly, putting a hand on her cheek. "I wonder if anyone will be able to make it to the finish."

Kirito grinned. "That sounds like a challenge. Think you can back it up?"

Naotsugu thought this looping business was pretty damn messed up and apparently drove everyone bonkers, but he bet Shiroe would keep them all on their toes.

Naotsugu's heart quailed when he saw Shiroe pushing up his glasses.

Behind Shiroe, a beautifully sculpted castle pierced the clouds with white towers. All around the large, paved courtyard they stood upon, gardens and hedges enhanced the natural beauty of the land.

In front of Shiroe, a slime monster rested. It looked like the basic green slimes that could be found in some sewer systems. Its face was actually kind of cute.

"Congratulations on being the first to reach the Fairy Queen's castle," Shiroe announced magnanimously. Instead of a Leprechaun, he wore his Alf form: white wings and pale hair, and equipment of beyond-legendary quality. "This," he said, pointing to the slime, "is the first enemy you must face."

Naotsugu asked nervously, "But it's a common slime, isn't it?"

Shiroe snapped his fingers. The slime's eyes turned red, and the indentation of its mouth turned into a gaping maw. In a single movement, it jumped into the air and grew until it was as large a cottage. It dropped towards Naotsugu.

"Looper lesson number… who knows," said Shiroe, "Expect the unexpected."

Naotsugu used his shield to deflect the slime temporarily, launching to one side, rolling, and coming up in a crouch with a ball of fire in his arms. "Hell of a tutoring session, buddy," he said as he launched the fireball at the

The slime act the flame and grew larger, and then enlarged even further. It proceed to chase Naotsugu around the courtyard.

"I did warn you," Shiroe noted.

Between breaths and dodges, Naotsugu shouted, "That...doesn't count…as a warning..at all!"

3.2 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

"Naotsugu, would you mind trying this?"

Akatsuki flinched as she watched the Guardian grab the potion. Before she even thought to act, he downed the potion immediately.

"You're taking this way too personally," Shiroe whined as he dangled from the talons of a griffon above Mirror Lake.

The griffon gave a small grin, "I think he needs a few more loop de loops, what do you think, Shimp?"

Akatsuki, sitting on the back of the griffon, kicked the chimera's sides, "Don't call me a shrimp! And yes, that would be appropriate. And maybe drop him in Mirror Lake for good measure."

"Chief, would you mind trying this?"

Naotsugu and Akatsuki sighed then looked to see what new transformation would overtake Nyanta. The werecat took a sip of the potion, "Oya, oya, what have we here-nya. Your steak sauce could use a bit of salt-meow."

The two humans facefaulted. Shiroe gave a smirk at the two, "Tried my hand at cooking this time-"

Shiroe met the business end of a shield and knee, both of the humans speaking in unison, "Chief Nyanta, is it alright if we Knee/shield smash this strange enchanter in the face?"

Nyanta just looked on in confusion with his head tilted, "Nya?"

3.3 (Lord Circe)

Shiroe held out the contract to Nyanta. He had just finished explaining about the Loops, and he had offered the opportunity to become a Looper to Nyanta. He had no idea if it would work, but it seemed like it would be just like granting the Adventure Subclass.

Nyanta had agreed to try it. If it worked, they could potentially bring all of Log Horizon into the Loops. It would change the face of the world, no, the multiverse itself. As the glow of Nyanta signing the contract filled Shiroe's vision, he idly wondered how Regan would classify this new magic.

Shiroe blinked awake. He was lying facing an unfamiliar ceiling, but his view was blocked by a piece of paper lying on his face. Slowly, he lifted the paper until the words on it swam into view.

Please, do not try that again. Take this time, and think about what you have done. ~ Sarawasti

P.S. Enjoy your "position", O Club President. ~ Skuld

Shiroe blinked, before trying to sit up, only to fall back down under the weight of the mountain range that had taken up residence on his chest. As he stared at the ceiling, Shiroe, AKA CLub President of the Eiken Club, whimpered softly.

Sarawasti bustled around, frantically moving between a pair of terminals as she tried to track down what had happened. It appeared that another side-effect of Iris' program had popped up again. Shiroe had tried to activate the cat-man, Nyanta, as a Looper. Unfortunately, while the contract could identify the status of a Looper, it couldn't verify the authority with which Shiroe tried to grant it. This led to a conflict which tore the two of them out of the current Loop. Shiroe was currently in Eiken, Skuld had come in to help patch up the hole, and now Sarawasti was trying to figure out what to do with Nyanta.

Simply put, he couldn't be Looping, but he had been marked as a potential Looping Candidate. Given his proximity to Shiroe, he had already had that designation, which led to an error in his code. Sarawasti could put it right, but it would either lock him out of Looping for some time, possibly permanently, or she could greenlight him as a Looper and allow Yggdrasil to resolve his status through the Loops. She didn't want Shiroe, or any of the other Loopers, to think this was a valid method. She would have to revisit the Contract system and alter the Looper subclass to prevent future mishaps.

Sarawasti bit her lip, before sighing. She quickly typed in her authorization for Nyanta to be greenlighted as a Looper, and then reinserted him back into the Loop structure. She then set about typing up a most firm letter to Shiroe outlining why it was horribly foolish to do what he did.

3.4

Naotsugu woke up as he Woke Up, and checked the date. He had eight years and a few months before the Catastrophe. Shiroe had

talked about looping this early before - it matched up with his original *Elder Tales* join date or something - but Naotsugu never had.

That meant that he needed to graduate from high school again. Damn, he wasn't looking forward to that whole deal: exams, college applications, figuring out what he wanted to major in. The easiest thing would be to repeat the baseline, but he figured he might as well do something new.

First thing's first, he thought, he had to contact Shiroe. Shiroe had pressed a booklet onto Naotsugu to keep in his subspace pocket for loops just like this. Besides the complete address and contact info for Shiroe and Akatsuki, it had stuff like general stock market trends, recommended investments, and a list of good pawn shops.

Shiroe liked to plan ahead. Loops were unpredictable. Shiroe probably had a blast every loop thinking up contingency measures for weird situations.

Naotsugu punched in a short text message on his cell, ' *Shiroe, I just woke up. Got any plans?* ' and sent it off. He got a reply within moments.

' *Going shopping for the game. Want to meet up?* '

Considering what his younger self's schedule had been, Naotsugu grimaced. He didn't think playing a game in his free time would fly with his parents, hung up as they were on him keeping up his grades and getting into a good school. His allowance could handle the subscription fee, but hiding it would be tough. ' *Not going to buy the game yet. Can still meet. Where at?* '

Three hours later, Naotsugu stood in front of the game store, craning his head around to look for Shiroe in the crowds. He reminded himself to look for a younger, shorter version. No Shiroe came forth.

A cute girl stood in front of one window, back to Naotsugu, and examined an *Elder Tales* display. She wore pants and an unflattering jacket, but the way they hugged her body hinted at a recent growth spurt from which the girl hadn't yet adjusted. It was a shame, too, since she looked the type who would be able to rock a pair of knee high socks and a short skirt. Naotsugu wouldn't mind seeing her in a school uniform.

Then his eyes took in her strangely familiar hair and the glasses frame that hooked over her ears. Together with the slothful appearance, she reminded Naotsugu strongly of Shiroe. In fact-

Naotsugu cursed the world, tilted his head back, and covered his face with his hands. Why the hell hadn't Shiroe warned him? Naotsugu had checked out a female Shiroe! He wanted to scrub the memory out of his brain.

"Naotsugu? Are you okay?" asked a concerned, still cute, and definitely female voice. Still hiding his face, Naotsugu cringed. He peeked out from under his hands. Yeah, the girl was Shiroe. She stood in front of him with a worried set to her face.

He grit out, "You're a girl," as he forced himself to meet her… his… Shiroe's eyes.

Shiroe blinked and looked down at herself. "Right. I forgot."

"You forgot?" Naotsugu exclaimed with a strangled shout. He ignored the affronted looks nearby walkers shot him.

Shiroe waved it off. "Loopers have to adjust some time, right? It happens to some more than most. I've spent a few loops like this now. Ever since…"

Naotsugu, finally dropping his hands, held her gaze seriously. "Shiroe, what did you do to deserve that?" He considered the situation. "I mean, panties are great, but I'd prefer to not see you in them."

He flushed, embarrassed. That had come out wrong.

Shiroe shot Naotsugu an entirely unamused look before painfully half-smiling. "I tried to use a contract to activate Nyanta as a looper."

Thinking back to the sort of warnings the help file had, Naotsugu winced. "Isn't screwing with loops one of the 'do not's?" he asked with trepidation.

"It had been a while since I read it, and it had been several loops since I had company," Shiroe admitting woefully.

She looked even cuter when she- Naotsugu mentally shook his brain and told it to fight the onslaught of teenage hormones. 'Shiroe is a guy' became his inner mantra.

Not noticing her friend's internal conflict, Shiroe continued on. "Next loop, I got a reprimand and a stay in Eiken as club president," she said with a shudder.

That didn't sound like much of a punishment to Naotsugu. A loop without much needed in the way of thinking and a potential harem of, ahem, gifted girls? Wasn't that a heavenly reward from the god of panties?

The problem for him would be if the cute girls were actually genderbent boys. That thought made Naotsugu shudder as well.

"And since then," concluded Shiroe, "my loops have been skewed to waking up as a girl eight years before the usual loop start. I've had some normal loops, but I figure I either destabilized something or got our admins annoyed with me. I hope that you showing up is a sign that the situation is improving."

Naotsugu chewed on that for a few minutes. "Sucks for you," he commiserated.

"Thanks," Shiroe replied dryly. "So, what are your plans for the loop?" Gesturing at the store behind him, Shiroe indicated that they should walk in now.

Naotsugu shrugged as he strolled a little behind Shiroe, carefully keeping his eyes on her head. "Vary things up in university. I might pick up some graduate courses instead of getting a job - not much point in that, right? I figure some things would go well with a new subclass in Theldesia, like pharmacology with the Pharmacist one, once that's added."

"Not a bad idea," Shiroe admitted. "I'd like it if *Elder Tales* had an Engineer class, but the closest are Mechanic or Carpenter."

As the automatic doors slid open, Naotsugu commented idly, "Too bad you just can't buy the game company and force them to add it."

Shiroe went silent and still so suddenly that Naotsugu stumbled into her.

"Sorry," he said. She said nothing. "...Shiroe?" he asked, slightly worried.

Shiroe turned around with a manic grin across her face and a dangerous, familiar glint in her eyes. "I have a new goal for the loop," she announced grandly.

Naotsugu watched his dreams of an easy eight years melt away as Shiroe hatched a plot of dubious legality.

3.5

Nyanta preferred to live through loops in a quiet way. While he could not stand the abuse that the Landers of Susukino withstood at the hands of Brigandia and its tag-alongs, alterations could be subtle: a

quiet word of warning here, helping someone out of the way there. Shiroe had not yet realized that Nyanta was looping at all.

Nyanta planned to handle this loop as he usually did. After a quick adjustment of his character progression using the loop-granted menu, he proceeded quickly but carefully through the inhabited ruins that compromised the town of Susukino. Unlike Akiba, which had both pleasant weather and thick vegetation, Susukino had a harsher environment. The run-down buildings had no greenery upon them.

Even the town layout was less open, divided by tall walls that formed circles radiating outwards from the guild center while simultaneously dividing those circles into smaller sectors. It separated the populace in a very physical way, though numerous gates and stairways ensured that the walls did not impede intercity travel greatly. That problem only arose after violence and despair seized the city.

Passing through the market, Nyanta paused in surprise as a new situation unfolded. A Sorcerer Elf dressed in purple had approached a Lander's shop while most of the crowd still had not found their bearings. Calling upon his status screen informed Nyanta that the Elf's name was Vaati, a Sorcerer. Nyanta did not remember such a person from his previous lives.

Vaati proceeded to thoroughly question the Lander, earning the shopkeeper's reluctant trust through generous bribes. With folded arms, Nyanta tapped his claws lightly against his left arm as he watched the lengthy process and reviewed his in-loop memories.

In this Susukino, Vaati "the Purple Gale" had replaced Londark "of Gray Steel" as Brigandia's second-in-command. As such, Vaati had a poor reputation among any but other PKers despite having participated in several successful raids.

The Vaati in front of Nyanta did not carry himself like a gamer caught unawares. Rather, his methodology spoke of past experience. The chances of Vaati being a foreign looper was quite high.

Vaati confirmed this when a rambunctious, ill-mannered youngster attempted to steal from the Lander that Vaati was using. As if using magic were no different than lifting a finger, the Adventurer turned to stone in an instant. Nyanta knew of no such spell that could be used without consequence in the cities of Theldesia.

Vaati turned towards the street. His cloak billowed dramatically in a nonexistent wind. "If any other Adventurers harass the Landers," he announced, "I will deal with it personally. This city will be mine, and anyone residing in it is also mine. If you wish to challenge me, please do." His smile was entirely unpleasant.

No one did. Most of the crowd drew back in fear. Vaati began to walk away.

Nyanta analyzed what he had seen so far. Vaati certainly displayed selfishness more than a good heart. The way Vaati openly used foreign magic against another spoke of a willingness to harm those who crossed him and a disregard for the opinion of others so long as they did not obstruct him.

Vaati apparently had narcissistic tendencies, but Vaati would do better for the city than Demikas. With a little effort, Nyanta could likely find a way to temper Vaati's attitude. After all, at this point in the loop, Nyanta held the key to what people would want the most.

Nyanta approached Vaati. Vaati raised a hand in what was a rather threatening gesture for a mage to make.

Nyanta held up his hands peaceably and decided to favor a blunt approach. "I'm not interested in a fight. I wanted to ask if you were a Looper, nya."

He confirmed it and introduced himself, but the conversation ended on a sour note as Vaati thought that Nyanta had denigrated Vaati's experience with ruling over others. That did show an unfortunate tendency to overreact on the mage's part.

A little grateful that he had not been turned to stone, Nyanta continued to follow Vaati anyways.

"Do you have something to add?" Vaati snapped. "You are very close to becoming a statue."

Nyanta smiled. "I was wondering if you needed a chef, nya." He cleared his throat, then whispered, "You see, only chefs can create food, and no one else knows how to make food with flavor. If you desire to only eat ingredients for the rest of your time here, I will happily take my leave, nya."

Vaati twitched violently. "So the pear I had earlier-"

"One of the few things with any taste, nya," Nyanta confirmed. "I'm afraid that anything cooked by anyone else will unfortunately have identical flavors."

"Explain," Vaati hissed.

"Drinks taste like water. Food tastes like soggy rice crackers," Nyanta said plainly.

Vaati's jaw clenched. Making a disgusted face, he nearly whined, "I knew this place was too good to be true." He huffed. "Yes, you're hired, come along. Backstab me and I will make you into a statue - I am certain you can comprehend my methodology."

Then, they ran into Demikas, and Vaati added another statue to his collection.

Nyanta waited for Shiroe by the city gate. Shiroe entered with Akatsuki and Naotsugu as usual, but he was quite surprised to see the Adventurers of Susukino acting happy, talking, and laughing without any hint of violence or threatening behavior. Landers mingled with the crowd as if it were natural.

"Is that you, Nyanta?"

"Good to see you, Chief!"

Shiroe and Naotsugu greeted Nyanta warmly. Akatsuki also gave a friendly nod. With how none of them saw anything strange with his presence, Nyanta suspected all three of them were looping.

Nyanta nodded. "Nice to see you as well, nya," he returned the greeting with a polite bow. "I understand you are here to pick up Serara. She is currently shopping in the market if you would like to seek her out, nya."

Shiroe turned his head as he regarded the modifications Vaati had made to the city. "Those are quite intricate statues," Shiroe complimented. "Did an Artisan carve them?" Then he added, "But why are those people talking to those statues?"

Nyanta twitched his ears. "Those are the people currently serving a sentence for minor rule breaking, nya."

Shiroe, Akatsuki, and Naotsugu all turned to him with pale faces. "Those are truly people, Chief Nyanta?" she asked with horror. "Are they… aware?"

Nyanta waved off their concerns. "Yes, but do not worry. Vaati cancels his spell at the end of each day, nya. I convinced him that leaving them alone for longer might be detrimental to their minds, nya. Usually there are less, but this guild was caught harassing a newbie guild while Vaati was already in a bad mood."

"What do the people who break major rules get?" Shiroe inquired, sounding unsure if he wanted to know.

"Permanently turned to stone," Nyanta replied, "but with more care, nya. They are placed under a dreamless sleep spell first and are entirely unaware of the length of their incarcerations, nya."

Shiroe shot Nyanta an unreadable look. "You're okay with this?"

Nyanta gestured held his hands palm up and shifted them back and forth in a so-so gesture. "Would you have preferred Demikas in charge again, nya?"

"No, of course n-"

The significance of Nyanta's statement struck Shiroe and the other Log Horizon members at about the same time.

"You're a looper!" they all exclaimed, pointing at Nyanta. It was most comical.

Nyanta smiled as only a satisfied cat could. "Correct, nya. Vaati is as well, of course." He waited patiently for them to get over the surprise.

Akatsuki asked, "How many loops?"

"I wonder, nya," replied Nyanta vaguely. He gestured for them to continue walking. They had attracted too much attention with their shouting.

Shiroe rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I remember hearing about Vaati before from a girl called Malon from the Hyrule loop. They had a couple of looping villains that were driven evil by a curse; Vaati was one. A visiting looper took care of it, but lingering effects require that someone plays the villain to prevent anyone else from being affected."

Naotsugu rolled his eyes and grinned. "She recommended you for the job if you happened to be in town, didn't she?"

Shiroe's entirely dignified silence was answer enough.

Naotsugu chuckled. "So, Chief, is this Vaati a decent guy?"

"Mostly, nya." Nyanta tilted his head. "He does indeed show many signs of villainy, but manages to repress most of his base instincts

and innate selfishness in order to do what ruling properly requires, nya. However, when he gets bored, he causes mischief, and these days he has been getting more and more bored."

Gaining a thoughtful countenance, Shiroe asked. "How do you think the city would fare without his presence?" They turned a corner as the sky slowly darkened, clouds heavy with rain.

"Fairly well," Nyanta replied. "He is not above delegation, nya. The city is content enough with the current situation that there is unlikely to be any rebellion. The guilds have a more even balance of power, and all understand that Landers are real people and necessary for access to supplies."

Shiroe pushed up his glasses. They glinted in the sun just before a raincloud obscured it again. "I know a Fairy Ring that crosses Kanami's path."

Amusement spread across the faces of the other two former members of the Debauchery Tea Party, and even Akatsuki smiled slightly.

In the game, Kanami's charisma had drawn in even loners like Shiroe. In real life? Even Unawake, she undoubtedly could keep even a bored, ancient, childish archmage in line.

Perhaps Nyanta would visit her himself in a future loop. His whiskers scrunched happily at the thought.

3.6 (LordCirce)

Shiroe, or rather Kei Shirogane, blinked as he Awoke in his usual chair. He turned to check the clock. Usually, he had between one to three hours between his Awakening and the launch, plenty of time for any of the others to message in that they were Awake. The clock read...11:57. Ok, so he had just under three minutes. And...

Then the Loop Memories hit. Kei wasn't waiting for the midnight release of the 12th expansion of Elder Tales. He was waiting for the 12th expansion of Astra Nova, a massively successful MMORPG, set in a galaxy that used to be ruled by a succession of empires, but that was now rather lawless, with the various factions and remnants of the empires vying for power.

As the seconds ticked away, Kei checked his account. The menu system, as far as he could tell and remember, was virtually identical to Elder Tales. There were 10 races instead of 8, but there were still 12 classes. He was a half-Sindral Astramancer. The Sindrals were one of the former rulers of the galaxies, but they had all but vanished, with only traces of their ancestry showing up here and again. An Astramancer was a mystic class that set up large combo attacks by positioning small magic spheres called Star Globes. And, his name was still Shiroe.

Shiroe stumbled slightly as he transitioned into the game world. His character was standing on an observation deck in a large space station, *Furizan* . It was the main starting point for most players, called Voyagers. He smiled as his memories supplied the NPC name: Children of the Stars. As Shiroe turned to observed the large gas giant they were orbiting around, he smiled to himself. This Loop looked like it would be interesting.

3.7 (Indalecio)

"..In the Database... the database.." sang Naotsugu, obviously in a good mood, ruined only slightly as Akatsuki approached with a serious look on her face.

"Okay, look. Its only been a few days since the loop started, but I need to ask one question. Why do you have a beard?"

Naotsugu looked down at the long brown beard he was currently sporting. "Oh! I'm currently a dwarf this loop. My pre-awake self noticed that Dwarf meshed with Guardian pretty well, so went with that instead of Human."

She hadn't thought of that, but a quick check indicated that Naotsugu was indeed a dwarf. "Okay, but that still leaves me with one question. Why are you still 2 meters tall!?" she said as one of her eyes began to twitch.

3.8 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

Whenever Shiroe decided to take an in-game vacation loop, he went travelling. Sometimes, he'd leave the country altogether and travel with Kanami. Others, he'd vacation in Choushi or the Ice Palace and work for the people of the land. Every now and then, he would travel Japan. He wasn't alone in his journeys, unless he decided to be alone. The Round Table had more of an effect than just restoring the atmosphere to Akiba. For example, the West Wind Brigade would leave Akiba if the council never happened or fell apart. Shiroe often traveled with them. This time, the Brigade and most of the Log Horizon members were exploring the mountain villages. It was at the moment they reached the peak of a mountain in the Sand Leaf Peninsula that they saw it.

"My Lord, am I seeing things?" an Awake Akatsuki asked.

Shiroe couldn't believe this himself, "Unless we ate some of those mushrooms that guy was selling in Choushi, we are indeed witnessing the unbridled truth."

The enchanter searched his loop memories, then slumped against a nearby tree with a gloomy expression. countless mountain trolls marched through the valley below. The "Return of the Goblin King" event had been replaced by the Mountain Troll Migration. It was gonna be one of those loops.

3.9 (LordCirce)

Shiroe smiled at Akatsuki's pouting expression. It was just after the Susukino rescue, when Nyanta would reveal his cooking prowess in the baseline. All four of them were awake at this point, though, so Akatsuki had wanted to test her cooking against Nyanta's. One thing had led to another and...

"Don't worry, Shorty, your fish still taste amazing!"

"Don't call me Shorty." Akatsuki sat there, idling poking at her fish, before sullenly looking at Nyanta's dish.

It was a Failure. Technically, at least, it was the black goop that was formed when a player failed to cook a dish properly. When tasted however...

"You just can't beat Chief. This Chocolate-Flavored Failure is good! Almost as good as..."

BAM "Lord, may I knee this pervert in the face?"

"Ow! Don't ask after you've already done it."

Shiroe just laughed before sampling more of the Failure.

3.10 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

Eden Hall was open to everyone: a hideout for those who suffered a fate worse than Eiken, a hangout for those trading notes and ideas, a circle of friends where braggarts and heroes can share their latest victories and a place of healing when the really strange loops sneak up on you. Shiroe pushed through the entrance and stalked to the bar-counter. While Big Macintosh had a wide variety of alcoholic

beverages from across the multiverse, it paled in comparison to Ryuu's collection. Since Ryuu was the Eden Hall Anchor, he was Awake every single loop, which allowed him to expand his collection every loop.

Ryuu was blessed with a razor sharp memory, capable of remembering every customer he ever had and what drink they favored. Shiroe and the other Loopers from Log Horizon were travellers, always seek looking to see what was beyond that next hill. Ryu gave a grin, as he recalled Shiroe talking about Kanami, who even though moved to Europe lit a fire under Shiroe in his baseline. Shiroe favored-

Shiroe's eyes met Ryu, completely dark in frustration, "Dispense with the analysis, Sasakura-san. I'll take a bourbon on the rocks."

Ryu was completely unfazed by Shiroe's attitude as he poured the requested drink. Shiroe took a deep sip of the bourbon and set it down, answering the bartender's curious question, "It was a variant loop where Naotsugu hated my guts but still hung out with me, Akatsuki was the spawn of Satan and my interface computer kept crashing at inopportune times. Marielle, another guild master from my universe, was off her medications when in the baseline she doesn't have meds to begin with, oh and Akatsuki is a murderous psycho demon who I accidentally unleashed upon the world! She slaughtered all the dragons residing above the Depths of Palm and somehow managed to set fire to the Guild building in Akiba without setting off the Guard System!"

Ryu shrugged, "Sounds like you looped into your abridged loop. You should talk to Twilight about her abridged loopset. She considers it almost as bad as Eiken."

Shiroe just took another sip of the bourbon and tried to let the alcohol erase the memories of that loop.

3.11

The Looper opened the abilities menu and looked over the skills available for activation...

Befriending .

"Must be from the Nanoha loop," Zelda determined as she read the description.

'Eighty percent chance of applying a Heel-Face Turn when defeating an enemy of a compatible type with a Critical Hit.'

Makes Me Wanna Shout (Like a Dragon) .

Harry snorted. "Skyrim."

Yer a Wizard .

Sonic rolled his eyes. "Hogwarts, huh."

Invisible Pink Earth Pony .

Pinkie Pie bounced happily and then activated the skill. If one looked carefully, one might see hoofprints in the dirt leading away from where she had stood.

Maybe.

Clap On .

"That's a ridiculous name for using alchemy without a drawn circle. Whoever designed this system is an idiot," Ed grumbled, then twitched as he looked further down the list.

Miniature Eruption (auto-trigger) .

Ed exploded. "Who are you calling so short he couldn't-"

Coyote chuckled as he poked at the coding that translated loopers' abilities between settings. He owed Sun Wukong big time for distracting Saraswati.

Theldesia was now set to utilize Hub pop culture references, sarcasm, and humor in its looper menu system. He checked a sample ability and bit back a full blown laugh. ' *Putting a Sock in It'* was certainly one way for a girl to crossdress.*

*It worked well in Discworld.

Chapter Notes

3.1: Sword Art Online fusion. Shiroe's lesson ended with slime guts over *everything* .

3.2: I don't trust that steak sauce.

3.3: Even smart people can do stupid things.

3.4: Naotsugu would like some brain bleach now, plzthx.

3.5: Legend of Zelda fusion. There's a Vaati POV version in the Zelda loops maintained by LordCirce (8.9).

3.6: The MMO mentioned is not a real game.

3.7: Naotsugu is a tall dwarf because he is a troll.

3.8: And this has a lot of trolls.

3.9: To quote the snip writer: "Nyanta is a *good* Chef."

3.10: Gods get bored too.

Chapter 4

AN: Been a while. My fault, sorry. We had enough loop snips; I just needed to put them all together. Two more chapters are ready and will be posted within a week.

4.1 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

12:01 AM

Shiroe blinked several times in rapid succession. His eyes glanced around, landing on his darkened room. The mage was still in his house, at his computer. His monitor showed his character and the voicechat with the twins were still going. He blinked again and acted, "Please forgive me, Touya, Minori, something has come up in the real world. I'm going to cut the training short."

Touya was the one who replied, "I understand, Shiroe. See you later."

With that, his game avatar used call of home. Once at Akiba, he waited with baited breath. Then, one by one, the other loopers gave him a call, trying to see what they should do. Shiroe suggested they meet up in Shinjuku in the next couple days to plan for whatever this loop held.

Two days later, 9:00 AM

All four loopers were sitting at C&C curry shop near Shinjuku station. They sat at a large circular table, all eyes on Shiroe, who had a bag on his lap. "Let's get the obvious out of the way, we're still here in the real world."

Naotsugu was chewing on a snack bar as they waited for their curry to arrive, "So, what the hell is going on? You must know something, strategist."

Shiroe pushed his glasses up. "Variant loop, probably. It could be a fused loop, but not in the usual way."

Naotsugu and Akatsuki both held surprised expressions while Nyanta was curious. The former Werecat replied, "Oh? What makes you say that?"

Shiroe lifted the bag from his lap onto the table, withdrawing several books with the pictures of familiar faces. Nyanta's mouth spread into a calm grin. "I see..."

Naotsugu was the most surprised. "But...this means that...we're in the Hub!"

The book covers included Naruto carrying a red scroll in his mouth. Another book portrayed Haseo of The World loop, also known as the .hack universe, with Endurance translucent behind him. Those were just two as Shiroe also had one of Pokemon and another Sonic. Normally, at least some of those materials could not be found in Shiroe's home loop.

Shiroe continued, "Not quite, since Elder Tales is still active. Whatever pulled us in last time didn't take place this time. While I doubt there are other loopers here, we should send out word through the official forums, see if anyone is here with us."

Akatsuki replied, "What should we do in the mean time, Shiroe?"

Four plates of curry were placed in front of them as Shiroe gave his answer. "Might as well think of this as a vacation loop. I'm going to finish my master's. We should probably meet up every week or couple of weeks and brainstorm ideas."

Naotsugu looked disappointed. "I've got to go back to my job."

Akaktsuki was also in college and Nyanta… well. "I'll find a way to occupy my time."

A year passed after Novasphere's release and the game was more popular than ever. While Shiroe and Akatsuki finished their college courses, Naotsugu left his job to start an internet cafe with Nyanta centered around Elder Tales.

In the game, Touya and Minori became veteran players under Shiroe's guidance. Other than that, the game continued as it always did, with a thirteenth expansion having been released a few days ago. Part of Novasphere's expansion included the ability to modify the game. Certain aspects of the game were reminiscent of events in the game world, the creation of the steam ship as one example. Another was the Fallen Guardian event where Enbalt Nelles, a royal guard, assaulted adventurers in Akiba and resulted the city being undefended against monster attacks.

The thirteenth expansion, Looter's Paradise, took all of the player made items and added them into the game as potential loot.

Three of the four Elder Tales Loopers sat around the table of their cafe, Nyanta being the only one not present. The customers had long since left and the three were sitting around, laughing it up about the new expansion. Naotsugu stopped laughing long enough to finish, "So we finished slaying the dragon and gathering up the loot he left behind. Minori opened the chest for the screen to read:

"In this chest, you find:

A plain looking armor of darkness,

An angelic grenade of necromancy

A book titled: 'Oh Snap, the Longsword!'

A spear of the archer

A tentacle roasted salmon of Light

A book titled: 'Notes About lava'

An uninteresting half duck

A potion of vapor

A sizzling Diamond

A draught of Butterflies

A Mythical atlas containing 'Bolt of Fauna.'"

Shiroe held a cup of coffee to his mouth. "All fan made items?"

Naotsugu gave his small grin. "Yep."

Akatsuki sat with a computer in front of her, pulling up every item on that list. Each one seemed more useless than the last. "Glad the developers for the original game didn't come up with a Spear of the Archer. The weight alone would be too much for most people to use. And the longsword book that weakens your sword skills, who came up with that one?"

Shiroe took a sip of his coffee and grinned, deciding this wasn't so bad a loop after all.

4.2 (LordCirce)

"Mystical Fire!" Several glowing blue spheres of fire hurled from the burning branch clutched in Shiroe's grasp, slamming into the small horde of rabbits, Bunnelby according to his memories, causing them to chatter and fall backwards. Shiroe shifted, the fur he was covered in moving awkwardly as he scanned the area. Chief Nyanta was off

to one side, radiating psychic energy to hold the leader of the horde, a Diggersby, in the air, as the large form of Naotsugu wound up to deliver a Hammer Arm to the large rabbit. Shiroe turned to glance upward, just as several Water Shuriken hurled from the canopy to smash into the still-smoldering rabbits, knocking them out. Akatsuki dropped down behind Shiroe as he turned. She bowed, then straightened, her odd pink scarf waving around her neck.

"Enemy defeated."

Shiroe nodded as, behind them, the Diggersby was thrown back by Naotsugu's strike to land on the fallen Bunnelby. This was truly an odd Loop. Once again, they were in a game-turned-real, and the Elder Tale's menu system was still in use. However, there was no real distinction made between Adventurers, Monsters, and People of the Land, as all the inhabitants of the world were Pokemon. Distinctions were made between wild and civilized Pokemon, on the other hand. Shiroe sighed, then gestured for the rest of the group to gather around. He was glad for one thing. Unlike in the games he had found in the Hub, there were no limits to the number of moves you could learn, and you could learn moves beyond your "natural" moveset through training. Shiroe nodded to Nyanta, who smiled and then Teleported them back to Akiba.

4.3 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

"I see that you have a new sword," Shiroe mused as Akatsuki took a sip of her tea. The two were enjoying a balmy autumn afternoon at a player-run restaurant. Shiroe left it unsaid that she had two tantos on her back facing opposite directions, the higher blade being her Enameled Ceramic Dagger she favored in typical combat. The other was special, almost otherworldly but still seemed to suit Akatsuki just fine. She set down her tea and removed her newest weapon from her backside, pulling it out and setting it down for Shiroe to examine.

He immediately noticed the blade was evenly balanced and light, almost weightless even though it was noticeably bigger than the ceramic dagger. First, the hilt was a ceramic black with several holes revealing a ruby crystal hidden at its core. The blade was was blackened steel with red crystal encrusting its blade ridge on either side. She pondered the blade briefly, while mildly replying, "I had a loop in the Nanoha universe, where I replaced Fate Testarossa. Nanoha was kind enough to take me on as her pupil to learn their magic."

Shiroe looked down at the tanto again, "I see. So this is an intelligence device?"

The ruby in the base of the tanto glowed as it spoke, "THAT IS CORRECT, MY LORD. MY NAME IS YOSHI, NICE TO MEET YOU."

The voice was deep and slightly gravelly. Shiroe only barely managed to avoid dropping the weapon in surprise. Akatsuki pulled the weapon away, pressed a button on the handle and swung the tanto, causing the blade to swing back, revealing two slots for loading a cartridge each. After placing cartridges in each chamber, she gave Shiroe a wicked look, "Would you like to see what new skills I learned?"

She rose from her seat, her weapon in hand as if to fight the surrounding players. Shiroe blinked in surprise and rose from his seat, "Oy! What are you doing, you'll call-"

A Royal Guardsman appeared in front of them. Black Light appeared around Akatsuki. Upon the light fading, Akatsuki was clothed in a black cloak. Her hand blurred into motion, slicing at the Royal guard repeatedly. It happened so fast that Shiroe's eyes could only see a whirlwind of red surrounding the guardsman. After a second passed, she reversed her grip on the tanto and returned it to its hilt. With the final chink of the blade sliding into its home, the armor pealed away from the operator, revealing his surprised expression, but was unharmed. Akatsuki looked to Shiroe expectantly, "What do you think?"

Shiroe looked around as countless adventurers and People of the Land looked on, some impressed and the others seeming more frightened. Shiroe sighed and started planning their escape before the major guilds got wind of this and demanded they teach them how to do that.

4.4

As Nyanta's real name had changed in a couple of variations, he was content to think of himself as Nyanta. This loop, however, he did not even have that.

It was a year before the release of the Homesteading the Noosphere expansion. This loop, the Theldesian races had changed somewhat: rather than the Wolfhair, there was the Lionhair, and rather than the Werecats, there were the Weredogs.

Nyanta's pre-loop self favored dogs over cats and picked the Weredog race. The thought of spending an entire loop without any feline identifiers sat uncomfortably in his mind. One subclass available this loop suited his purposes.

Therefore, he had gone out earlier that day to make a few purchases and an adoption. The results were laying about his home: the carrier, the food and water bowls, the toys, and the calico currently imitating a rug on top of his computer desk.

On the screen, a notice had popped up after Nyanta completed a short quest for an NPC.

'Are you sure you want to change your job to Animal Trainer?'

He made his choice.

Serara timidly walked through the open door and gasped at the warm interior of the building. The private residence had such a forbidding exterior that she had feared that following the Weredog had been as much of a mistake as friending Demikas.

She turned to her rescuer, who had entered behind her and closed the door to shut out the sounds of violence on the streets. He had the face of an Akita, though he had a shortened snout as all Weredogs did. Bowing gratefully, she said, "Thank you for saving me, Wonta-san."

Wonta smiled gently. "Think nothing of it, wan," he replied, not sounding the least bit silly despite his habit of appending a dog sound to his sentences. "You can stay here as long as you need."

Then something that Serara had mistaken for a fur rug climbed to its feet in front of the fireplace. She gasped. "Is that your cat?" she asked in breathless wonder. "I've never seen a purple one."

"She is a Cheshire. They are only found in the British and European servers." He held out his hand, and the cat butted its head against it. "It turned out that they are far more intelligent than what was shown in Elder Tales. She has the ability to speak."

Serara's eyes widened. "Speak?" she squeaked.

Solemn, Wonta nodded. "I was surprised as well." To the cat, he said, "Konyan, this is is Serara. Serara, Konyan."

Konyan rubbed her head against Serara. "Nice to meet you, nya," she rumbled with a purr.

"N-nice to meet you, too."

Sitting on a log at enough of a distance from the Unawake trio of Akatsuki, Naotsugu, and Serara that said trio could not overhear,

Shiroe turned to his companion. "What the heck did you do, Nyanta?" Shiroe asked bluntly.

He had not yet tried to confirm that Nyanta was looping, but the large purple cat made the fact rather obvious. 'Wonta' would have gotten a dog if he tamed any animal at all.

"I mean," Shiroe clarified, "Konyan seems to remember living with you on Earth before the Catastrophe. How did you manage that?"

Nyanta chuckled as he stirred the stew pot hanging over the fire in front of him. "Konyan is also the name of my cat back on Earth. I had her around when I tamed the Cheshire in-game, and then I named the Cheshire after her - making it her account, if you will. She was even the one to click the mouse to confirm."

"I don't think it's supposed to work that way," Shiroe said faintly.

"It is not something I would try again," Nyanta confirmed. He continued, "I had her in my lap at the time of the update." He shrugged with an apologetic mien. "I was not sure if it would work, but it did. The increase in intelligence was unexpected."

Shiroe looked over at Nyanta, then at Konyan, who was being cuddled by Akatsuki and Serara both. "Are you sure this was a good idea?" he asked more quietly. Konyan acted like a five-year-old and definitely was sapient. "At the end of the loop, she will be-"

It would be as if Konyan never existed.

Nyanta paused in his stirring. His posture became much more downcast. "The increase in intelligence was unexpected," he repeated slowly. "I did not think this situation through to its end."

"Shiroe, I do not think you thought this situation through to its end, wan," Nyanta chided the Enchanter severely.

They were standing in the kitchen of the Log Horizon guild hall, and Shiroe held an empty vial and a signed contract in his hand. At the table next to them, a Lionhair child with purple hair and cat ears sat, clumsily figuring out how to drink a glass of milk.

She fumbled the drink slightly, almost spilling it on her oversized dress before bringing the glass to her lips. A few gulps later, she sat it down with a satisfied burp. A milk moustache decorated her face.

Shiroe coughed, embarrassed. "To be fair, she's the one who stole the vial from my lab. I only turned her into an Adventurer after she was already a demihuman."

Nyanta stayed quiet, watching Konyan as she observed the world with childlike curiosity.

Sighing, Shiroe handed Nyanta the contract. "She insisted on a few changes. You might want to read it."

As his eyes traced over the neat calligraphy of the contract with scribbled additions, Nyanta's hand clenched. He swallowed against the tightness of his throat and put the contract into his subspace pocket.

Shiroe bowed his head. "I'm sorry, Nyanta. I screwed up."

"This situation is my fault as well," Nyanta replied heavily. "I will spend as much time with her as I can, while the loop permits."

In the Crescent Moon guildmaster's room, Maryelle lounged on a couch while Konyan and Henrietta stood by a rack of dresses. Akatsuki was there as well, stationed by the door and keeping well out of Henrietta's reach.

Konyan clapped her hands and giggled as Henrietta pulled out a fairytale princess dress: pink, multilayered, sequined, and with semi-transparent wings and jewelry as accessories. Konyan giggled and,

remembering that Wonta had taught her to behave politely, gave a Henrietta a bright smile. "Thank you, Hen-nee-san, nya!"

Henrietta enveloped Konyan in a warm hug. "Oh, you're so adorable, Konyan-chan!" she cooed. "If only Akatsuki-chan agreed to dress up, too, you could both be fairy princesses!"

Konyan turned her face towards Akatsuki with pleading eyes. "Aka-nee-san?"

Akatsuki physically flinched backwards, automatically taking a defensive stance and shielding her eyes. She had known that escorting Konyan to Crescent Moon to wait for Wonta would make Henrietta much too close for comfort, but getting that look from Konyan was worse than blackmail.

Were those tears?

Henrietta pulled a matching, though larger, purple fairy dress off of the clothes rack. "If Akatsuki doesn't make a decision soon," she said mournfully, "Konyan-chan won't be dressed up in time to show off her new look to her papa."

Akatsuki flinched again, but this time for a different reason. As always, whenever someone referred to Wonta as Konyan's papa, Konyan stopped smiling and clenched her fists tightly.

"I'm sorry, Konyan," apologized Henrietta. "Did I say something wrong?"

Konyan's lips quivered. "Wonta-san gets sad whenever I call him 'Papa'," she admitted, sounding close to tears. "He doesn't like it, so I don't do it, nya."

Maryelle sat up, outraged. "But you're his daughter!" she protested.

Konyan looked to the floor and shook her head. "Not really. I'm just an accident." She sniffled. Henrietta and Maryelle began to protest

against Wonta's attitude.

Then Akatsuki was there, kneeling on the ground and steadying Konyan with a warm hand on her shoulder. Akatsuki denied, "That is not true at all. Chief Wonta might not have planned for you, and he does get sad sometimes. However, he is proud of you and sees you as his child. He only gets sad because he is scared that one day he will get separated from you. It has to do with something that happened to him before the Catastrophe."

Akatsuki had asked Wonta about it herself. Wonta had not been forthcoming with answers, but he had said that much, at least. She was angry that Wonta had not thought to explain the same to Konyan.

Konyan turned her head up to Akatsuki, revealing that the young girl had, in fact, started crying. "R-really?"

Akatsuki hugged Konyan. "Really," she promised, and then she stood. "Now, how about we both get changed before your father gets here?"

Konyan broke into a watery smile. "Okay!"

And then Henrietta was snuggling both of them and wailing about "moe" while Maryelle dug a handkerchief out of her inventory.

The next loop that Nyanta was awake, Shiroe dragged him off to an abandoned player-owned bar in Akiba and pulled out several containers of alcohol from his subspace pocket.

"Which is the strongest?" Nyanta asked as he sat heavily on a padded wooden stool.

Shiroe carefully opened a flask and poured out a thimble's worth of liquid into a shot glass. "This is called scumble. It's made from apples, mostly."

Nyanta held it up under the light emitted by the bar's Firefly Candlesticks and set it gently down on the table. "Perhaps drinking is not a good idea after all," he said as he pushed the glass away.

Shiroe looked at him sidelong. "How are you dealing with…?"

Nyanta played with a bottle of whiskey, turning it so that it shone in the light. He admitted, "Not so well. I miss her. I understand why loopers avoid such entanglements now. I do wonder why what I did worked like it did."

After heating a bottle of sake with a quick spell and pouring himself a drink, Shiroe knocked it back. "Yeah. You managed to circumvent the 'no creating new life' rule by adopting, it looks like, since she was technically a cat before she turned into an Adventurer."

Nyanta stilled. "I did, didn't I?"

"...Chief?"

Nyanta sat up straighter and smiled. "I adopted her from a no-kill shelter. If her life is not something that varies majorly between loops, I could find her again if we Awaken early enough."

Shiroe contemplated that. Even if Nyanta created closer ties to an Unawake Konyan, the chance that she would begin to loop was fairly low. However, like anything given infinite time, it was indeed a possibility, especially thanks to Nyanta's possession of the magical contract that Konyan had signed. The effect of it on Konyan and Nyanta's bond could carry over to any loop where Nyanta was Awake.

Taking out another sake glass, Shiroe poured both of them a drink. "Good luck," he toasted Nyanta.

They clinked their glasses together. "To Konyan," Nyanta vowed.

4.5 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

Shiroe blinked several times in rapid succession. He stood at the gateway to Akiba staring at the ninja assassin and her newest pet. "Akatsuki… what is this?"

The girl looked at him with bright, shining purple eyes, "Do you like him my lord? I named him Yoshi!"

Shiroe shook his head, "Akatsuki, that's a wyvern."

The 10 foot tall dragon stared at his master, his tail swishing back and forth like a dog. Akatsuki pulled a slice of boar meat and shouted, 'Roll over, boy!"

And so it did, curling in his wings, fell to its stomach with earth shaking force and started rolling. After finishing, it rose to its feet and roared. Akatsuki flashed to the back of the dragon and started scratching between its scales, then dropped the boar meat into the dragon's upheld and open mouth. Shiroe sighed and started walking away, "How am I going to explain this to the Round Table?"

Isaac of the Black Knights smirked at the gathered guild masters. "Interesting. Could your Akatsuki supply us with Wyverns as mounts?"

Shiroe facefaulted. "You can't be serious."

Krusty pushed his glasses up onto the bridge of his nose, a gleam crossing them. "D.D.D. would also be interested in acquiring wyverns for raid purposes."

The enchanter's expression turned gloomy. "Krusty, you too?"

Michitaka of Oceanic systems whispered with Roderick for a few seconds, then grinned. "Oceanic Systems could also use wyverns

for heavy lifting outside Akiba, especially for building more steam ships like the Ocypete."

Shiroe buried his hands in his face and sighed.

4.6

Out of necessity, Shiroe had purchased a building close to the center of town. Log Horizon had its own guild hall, of course. The second building served a different purpose entirely.

Shiroe pushed up his glasses and looked across the people sitting in the tiered desks across from him. They varied in ages and classes, though the majority were Sorcerers or Summoners. Not many people chose to be Enchanters. The next highest portions were the healing classes: Kannagi, Clerics, and Druids. Very few were from the weapon or warrior classes, as expected. The majority of those were Bards.

Shiroe strode to the podium at the front and center, not bothering to glance at the pages of notes in front of him. He knew what he needed to say.

Without lifting a finger or saying a word, he gathered mana, shaped it, and applied a sound buff to himself. "Welcome," he said, "to Magic 101.

"You are here for many reasons. Some of you want to improve your battle abilities. Others have a more scientific mindset and want to know the hows and whys of magic use. A few have a different purpose entirely: they want to create their own unique spells, a magical Overskill if you will."

Shiroe gave a slightly evil smile. "This class will teach you all of that. To show just what can be done with mana, we'll go to my first student, Akatsuki. She will be serving as your TA for the class."

Looking behind him, Shiroe suppressed a flinch. Akatsuki was scowling quite fiercely at him.

The source of Akatsuki's ire directly linked to her current outfit. Rather than gear suited for a ninja, she wore the gear of a mage: cloth that mimicked her Assassin's outfit only in color, looser and more likely to hinder her movement. The hooded cloak and jewelry-like accessories obviously annoyed her the most; she kept unconsciously tugging at them. In her hand, she held a finely wrought red-gold staff whose tip curved around to form a snake looping around a tiger's eye gem.

Shiroe had asked her to make her account a Sorcerer this time around. She obviously still had issues with the change. However, she had mostly forgiven Shiroe; she understood why she had asked him.

Akatsuki dropped the frown and shifted into a more neutral expression. "At my lord's request, I created spells not necessarily meant for use in combat. For example…"

She gathered mana around herself, enough so that even the warriors - the least magic-sensitive classes - could perceive it if their levels were high enough. Then, she shaped the raw magic in a specific way.

Abruptly, she transposed to just in front of Shiroe.

"Line of sight teleportation is only one possibility, though the process is very delicate and requires concentration to land correctly. Appearing embedded in an object is, needless to say, quite painful and frequently deadly."

Some of the class looked nauseous at the implications. While they would resurrect from any fatal accident, most would prefer such a fate.

"Spells can be both safer and less visual. If I do this," she lectured as she twisted her magic another way, "then I can use a tracking spell to find anything I know exists, whether this is a treasure chest in a dungeon, an enemy, or an animal. Or, for that matter, a friend. It is the equivalent of drawing a mental mini-map with a compass pointing towards the target."

Without moving, she shifted her mana slightly, and Shiroe gained an entirely visible white glow.

A tiny, proud smile crossed Akatsuki's face. "If, for example, you needed to help a friend find a lost cat, or a father find a lost daughter… If that is your goal, this spell will do it."

Anything a looper learned on Theldesia also worked on Earth. Akatsuki, Shiroe, and Naotsugu would support Nyanta's search for Konyan in any way they could.

Shiroe clapped his hands to get the attention of the class back onto him. "So, let's start with the basics, shall we?"

4.7

Akatsuki found herself Awake in a pedestrian street in Tokyo. She pulled herself out of the flow of bodies and looked around.

If her eyes did not deceive her, Shiroe and Naotsugu were also present with their normal Earth appearances - and Awake, as they nodded when they met her eyes. That made her grow alert for any oddities in this world.

Two issues in Akatsuki's memories indicated that the loop varied from the baseline. First, the Elder Tales servers had all crashed yesterday.

Second, today was May 4.

Suddenly, a voice spoke in her head. ' *Hey, this is weird, isn't it?* '

Akatsuki swallowed back an incredulous shout. Again in her mind, she heard a cautious reply from Shiroe. ' *Naotsugu? Since when are you telepathic?* '

If she and Shiroe were islands, Naotsugu was the bridge spanning between them. Akatsuki realized she couldn't talk to Shiroe directly; Naotsugu had somehow formed a connection that allowed them to 'hear' each other, though their minds only touched Naotsugu's.

' *Oh, I had a stint as a weird sort of horse. It came with a few benefits. Guess the Mindspeech stuck.* '

' *Equestria?* '

' *Nah, a place called Valdemar. I didn't have a human partner, so it was a little boring until the world-reshaping cataclysm needed to be stopped.* ' As Akatsuki rolled her eyes at further evidence of how ridiculous loops could be, Naotsugu added, ' *So, how are we going to play this loop?* '

' *Do you think this might be one without travel to Theldesia?* ' Akatsuki inquired.

Akatsuki could almost feel Shiroe adjust his glasses. ' *We cannot count on it. The circumstances of the server crash are too suspicious. I suspect that Theldesia exists but suffered some sort of catastrophe before we could be brought there to prevent it.* '

' *The Genius?* ' wondered Naotsugu.

' *Likely,* ' came the agreement. ' *This loop, let's keep to baseline abilities and take the actions that our Unawake selves would have. Unless you are of a different opinion?* '

Akatsuki and Naotsugu sent their affirmatives. Naotsugu added, ' *I'm gonna cut off the Mindspeech now. It's taking more out of me than I*

thought. Let's have fun, alright? '

Naotsugu's touch receded from Akatsuki's mind. She spared a moment to thank the gods that the pervert hadn't picked up full telepathy.

Then the sky exploded into light. Akatsuki automatically rolled for cover behind a bench as the light condensed into an orb that floated towards the ground.

She waited, knowing that her normal self would not have had the confidence to face the threat. Naotsugu and Shiroe took similar positions. Most of the crowd, near panic, had retreated to a safe distance. Several had their phones out to record the event.

The orb touched the ground. The light pulsed once more and faded. Where it had been stood a single man in knightly armor, a sheathed sword at his side and a large scroll in his hands.

The man was Elias Hackblade, the hero of Theldesia.

He held the scroll aloft. "People of this world!" he announced clearly. "The Adventurers, who came from your world, have disappeared from mine. Threats from elsewhere besiege my home. I ask this of you, are there Adventurers among you who are willing to come to our aid? Come forth!"

Most of the crowd did nothing. In fact, they calmed down and started to chatter, figuring that the entire scene must have been some sort of promotion.

Elias looked around their faces and sagged in defeat. "Please, I beg you! We need help! Our enemy has destroyed the Thirteen Chivalric Orders and decimated the world's population. This is our last hope!"

A girl timidly approached Elias. "Um," she said meekly, "are you okay, mister?"

With a fervent look, he proffered the scroll to her. "If you are an Adventurer, please touch this scroll."

Uneasily trying to humor the seemingly insane weirdo, she put her hand on the scroll. "Okay. I haven't played very-"

Her words cut off as magic gathered around the scroll and then rolled down her arm and across her body. With a flash, the Japanese schoolgirl was replaced by an Adventure with red hair and stylized Druid gear. The girl was an Unawake Serara.

She gasped as she looked down at her clothes. "Eh? Eeehhhh?" She patted herself down and then pinched herself as if she might be breathing.

The crowd's murmuring had grown louder as the evidence that the situation was real continued to grow.

Elias's gaze turned downcast. "Ah, you are of a lower level than I expected."

Serara's eyes became watery. Miserably, she replied, "I tried to tell you that I haven't pla-"

"Ohmigosh," said a voice in the crowd, "is that Serara?" A busty woman with an Osakan accent drug a serious woman in a business suit to the front. "Umeko, look, it's Serara-chan!" She brought them both next to Elias, while a bewildered Serara shuffled out of the way as unobtrusively as possible. "We can't let her get involved in whatever this is alone. Mister, give us that scroll!"

Hope growing on his face once more, Elias held out the scroll to the women. The first put her hand on it without hesitation; the second gave her friend a searching look, sighed, and finally touched the scroll.

Serara squeaked at what the scroll's power revealed. "Maryelle-san? Henrietta-san?"

As her senses noticed a new source of arcane power, Akatsuki switched her focus to Shiroe. He signaled for her to wait, then pointed at the sky. "Hey! What's that?" he shouted to draw the crowd's attention.

Another orb of light appeared in the sky. This one did not descend to the ground. Rather, it shifted into a black portal from which a monstrous, deformed chimaera spewed out. Atop a misshapen body, three malformed heads flared out a different element with every breath: fire, lightning, or poison.

The crowd broke into two groups: those who panicked and ran away, and those who chose to go towards Elias. Shiroe, Naotsugu, and Akatsuki joined the latter, but only a handful more people had been changed when the three monsters launched down towards them, their poisonous heads leading.

Elias was trapped in a crowd, and the newly-minted Adventurers hesitated, unsure how to fight in their bodies. Akatsuki could see Shiroe's sharp glance analyzing all of the facts in an instant.

"Wait," he ordered Naotsugu and Akatsuki.

Henrietta pulled herself together first. Drawing her Composite Bow, she swiftly fired a high-quality arrow from her quiver. The arrow hit the poisonous head cleanly, piercing through the lower jaw and pinning the mouth shut. Though disabled, the head yet survived.

The chimaera recoiled from the pain, the undamaged heads letting loose terrifying roars.

Henrietta told the others, "Rely on your instincts! Your bodies know what to do!" even as she strung another arrow. Elias rushed to change the remaining people.

The chimaera dodged the next shots from Henrietta. One landed in the midst of the crowd just as Elias finished changing them all. The beats of its deformed wings, which crossed those of a dragon with

those of a bird, buffeted the newly-converted Adventurers across the concrete.

The lower-leveled ones might have died had not both Shiroe and Akatsuki cast Kannagi-class barriers preemptively. The spells, however, did not stop the chimaera's lightning head from snapping the scroll between its beak.

The world exploded into light.

Naotsugu bisected the chimaera with his sword even as his senses fled.

Akatsuki groggily returned to the waking world in the middle of a ruined city. She heard many groans around her as others also fought their way towards full consciousness.

Not surprisingly, she found Shiroe already standing. He grasped her hand and tugged her to her feet.

"So, we are in the Akiba of Theldesia," Akatsuki observed, holding onto his hand for a moment longer.

Shiroe nodded, adjusting his glasses. "In our circumstances, it is quite fortunate to be in a starting city," he said with wry amusement.

She raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

He made a small gesture encompassing all the surrounding people.

Akatsuki stared more closely at the masses around her. Then, what Shiroe had noticed struck her. While the numbers and beginnings of confusion resembled what Akatsuki had grown used to on her first days in Akiba, the quality of the people did not. Akatsuki saw an approximately equal number of each race and class, even the most unpopular. Additionally, the quality of their clothes was that of absolute beginners.

More than just the nearby volunteers, the magic of the scroll must have seized upon an unknown number of people in the area back on Earth. For anyone who had never played Elder Tales, the effect had perhaps caused an Adventurer body to be spontaneously generated.

For their sakes, Akatsuki hoped that their genders had not changed. It would make the transition easier.

"I understand," she told Shiroe,. Slipping into the formality she preferred while in Theldesia, she inquired, "What would you have me do, my lord?"

Shiroe hummed contemplatively. Finally, he suggested, "Go track down Serara and Elias Hackblade. Chances are that our and Naotsugu's actions in the battle derailed this variant's plotline, so don't worry too much about revealing your abilities."

Akatsuki bowed, mentally opening her menu and applying her wanted changes at the speed of thought. Then, she vanished in a burst of smoke. No one spotted her as she rushed up the side of the nearest mostly-intact skyscraper. Few actions provided more the rush of running up a vertical wall faster than a normal human eye could track.

The so-called ninja of the Elemental Countries preferred too many flashy techniques for Akatsuki's taste, but not all of their skills went against her style.

At the top of the building, she twisted into a jump to drop her momentum and landed in a crouch on the edge of the roof.

Serara stood in the middle of the roof. She stared at Akatsuki with a dropped jaw. A badger in Serara's arms shared the expression.

Akatsuki blinked at the unexpected animal. Then, her face blanked. She prayed that this world was not following that genre.

Akatsuki cleared her throat. "Is… Is that badger Elias Hackblade, by any chance?"

"You could tell?" Serara and the badger both exclaimed.

Akatsuki's palm met her own face. This is the setup for a magical girl anime, she thought with a groan.

As the ground rushed up at Akatsuki, she once again viciously cursed the magical-girliness of the current loop.

She stabbed her sword into the column of earth and rock that the enemy had launched at the mysterious Fairy Druid. The sword skill turned the entire column into dust. It collapsed en masse, leaving only a faintly obscuring dust cloud. Akatsuki's momentum reversed, sending her through a faint cloud of dust and back onto the side of a build.

She reached out and caught the falling figure of Fairy Druid by the back of the ribbony pink and green dress. Akatsuki's other hand shot out to catch a certain unconscious badger.

Akatsuki grimaced. "Serara, you need more practice. Being level 100 means nothing if you cannot aim."

The masked Fairy Druid squirmed in her grip, giving Akatsuki an alarmed glance. "Akatsuki-san!" Fairy Druid wailed. "You aren't supposed to know who I am!"

"I saw your first transformation," Akatsuki reminded Serara neutrally. Akatsuki did not say that everyone level 90 or above could see through the disguise magic. Akiba only let Serara pretend that she was not Fairy Druid because they were under threat of Shiroe.

"But still-!"

Akatsuki eyed a relatively nearby balcony. "I am going to throw you now. Be sure to land safely. Oh, and hold on to your badger." She shoved Elias into the arms of the gasping Fairy Druid and braced her legs for another jump.

Serara landed safely on top of - was that Rundelhaus? - while Akatsuki twisted, bounced off a balcony rail several floors above them, and headed up towards the enemy.

The Genius looked like an extra-hairy Wookie mixed with the concept of Son Goku. Its cloud transportation floated more than twenty stories above the marketplace plaza that it had thoroughly trashed. Luckily, it had attacked late at night while the market had no visitors.

The Genius attempted to defend itself with its heavy stone staff, but it failed. Akatsuki's sword landed a perfect blow against the monster's midsection.

She barely did any damage.

Not for the first time, Akatsuki cursed this loops' Genius' ability to bypass the town safe zone, as well as their durability against everyone but Fairy Druid.

The Genius struck back, and Akatsuki unwillingly disengaged to fall back towards Serara.

Serara and Rundelhaus were crouching over a now-awake Elias. "You mean I would be Fairy Sorcerer if I were a girl?" Rundelhaus was asking.

Akatsuki pushed herself into their little gathering, sheathing her sword. "Fight now, chat later," she told Serara. "I can handle this."

Serara met Akatsuki's eyes, looked at Rundelhaus, looked at Akatsuki again, and blanched. "Is that really… Um. Right." Serara

gave Rundelhaus a pitying glance and then activated her fairy wings with a "Fairy Flight!"

Glowing wings that reminded Akatsuki of her adventurers with Kirito sprouted on Serara's back. Fairy Druid rushed off to re-engage in battle.

Akatsuki turned her attention to Rundelhaus. In the blink of an eye, she had a specific potion in her hand.

Rundelhaus was looking at her with wide eyes. "Ma'am? What's this?"

Akatsuki smiled kindly. "It's a gender-changing potion. And this," she said, holding out another bottle in her other hand, "is a subclass-changing potion."

"...Huh?"

Blandly, Akatsuki stated, "As it turns out, Adventurer is a valid subclass." Naotsugu's Pharmacy skills were top-notch when he bothered to use them. Akatsuki always kept some of his creations in-pocket for emergencies. "If you truly wish to help, these will allow you to gain the qualities you need."

Rundelhaus stared at the vials with momentary disbelief, then grabbed at both. "If these let me fight…" He trailed off. The contents of the vials glinted suspiciously in the light, but Rundelhaus gathered his courage and straightened his shoulders. "Here goes nothing!"

He downed them one after the other. Light flared while a cloud roiled into being around him. In another moment, the air cleared, and a decidedly more feminine Rundelhaus examined his hands by the glow of an enchanted light. He looked at Akatsuki. "Did it work?" he asked in with a higher-pitched voice.

Rundelhaus now had much longer hair and more delicate cheekbones. If his clothes suited his new form better, it would not

have been inaccurate for Akatsuki to call him gorgeous. Nevertheless, he retained the innocent, puppylike quality that tended to attract Isuzu to him in most loops.

Akatsuki nodded. "Elias-san, can you change him - her - now?"

Elias cocked his head at Akatsuki. "Of course." He laid a paw on Rundelhaus's boot. "Fairy Blood," the badger invoked.

Rundelhaus glowed again as a transformation sequence ensued. Enthused by the rush of power, Rundelhaus jumped off the balcony before his yellow and red dress had even settled properly.

Akatsuki listened as Rundelhaus started screaming, apparently realizing that he didn't know how to work his wings. At least Serara caught him in time, Akatsuki thought as she turned her attention to Elias.

The badger was watching her with what was likely a mixture of curiosity and awe; interpreting badger expressions did give Akatsuki some difficulty. Elias noted, "You and your two friends are not like the others here. You do impossible things as if they were normal. But I nevertheless feel like I can trust you, Akatsuki-san."

Akatsuki turned to watch the battle. Rundelhaus had good instincts when it came to manipulating fire. "...If you ever truly need me, I will assist."

They watched the battle in silence for several minutes. Serara and Rundelhaus slowly wore the Genius down. It would lose soon.

Then, a rush of power signaled the opening of another Genius portal and the introduction of two more enemies to the fight.

Akatsuki sighed, "I should have known." She turned to Elias. "As I said, I will assist."

Elias nodded, serious, and padded over to Akatsuki. "This may feel a little strange," he warned.

Akatsuki closed her eyes. She hoped she would not regret her decision.

"I have to admit, I didn't expect you to accept his offer."

"Shiroe," Akatsuki said through gritted teeth. She futilely pushed against the lacey layers of the costume with the glittery scepter-dagger in her hand.

"Yeah, her in a dress like that? The shorty almost looks cute. But Serara's cuter."

"Naotsugu," she warned.

The Guardian jeered. "What are you going to do, sparkle at me?"

Seen from outside, the windows of their house flared purple with gleams of red. Naotsugu yelped.

With undisguised satisfaction, Akatsuki proclaimed, "Fireworks Blade Garden."

And then she added, "My lord, may I sparkle at this uncouth knight?"

Chapter Notes

4.1: Inspired by a random loot generator.

4.2: Everybody Polkamon! ...Er, Pokémon.

4.3: Magical Girl Lyrical Nanoha: friendship through overwhelming firepower.

4.4: Konyan might loop eventually, if they put enough effort into it. Canon characters take priority.

4.5: Dogs are only man's best friend. Akatsuki prefers dragons.

4.6: They've had a lot of time to mess with magic. Sometimes it's messy for everyone.

4.7: Magical Girl... Rundelhaus?

Chapter 5

5.1 (drakensis)

Hamelin's membership were all assembled in their guildhall for the important gathering of EXP pots.

That is, the *real* members were gathered to take those pots from the meal tickets who were technically members of the Guild but in fact were merely meal-tickets.

It was going perfectly smoothly too until one of those collecting reached the reedy-looking enchanter in the white cloak. Unlike the previous days, the man didn't hand over a pot.

"Come on, kid. Hand it over."

"I've run out." The enchanter stood up, drawing the attention of everyone in the Guild.

"Run out?"

"Well I'm not actually level 15," Shiroe revealed, deactivating the mentor system. His stats bounded up considerably. "So I only had a few EXP pots I hoarded from years ago."

"Wha... But then..." The sorcerer prepared to cast a spell to blast the brat away but hesitating over which one to use. If he actually was much higher rank then...

Shiroe raised his hand. "Voice vote: I nominate myself, Shiroe, Level 90 Enchanter, to be guild leader. Who supports me?"

There was a chorus of ayes from the younger players at the tables.

"Say no, say no!" screamed Twilight Explorer, the current guild leader. His flunkies snapped out of their surprise and most of them managed to utter the word before voting closed.

Not enough, though.

With a musical ping, Twilight Explorer's menu advised him he was no longer Guildleader of Hamelin. There was another ping from Shiroe's direction.

Shiroe...

Shiroe of the Sinister Shades?

Black-hearted Shiroe?

Shiroe the *Strategist* ?

"Gentlemen," Shiroe advised, fingers dancing over his menu. He bowed slightly to the 'real' Hamelin players. "You're booted. Goodbye."

And with that, the horrified players saw their guild hall disappear and instead the streets outside the Guild Building appeared.

Back inside his new Guildhall, Shiroe smiled smugly. "Well, it seems we've vanquished the monsters in this dungeon," he told the younger players. "So what comes next?"

Minori consulted her notes. "The looting?"

"Exactly. Tohya, I believe all the private rooms used by the former members of the guild are up there."

Shiroe adjusted his spectacles. This was much much easier from the inside. Now all he had to do was take over Akiba without leaving the guild hall... otherwise Akatsuki would probably kill him for using the Appearance-Alteration potion to disguise himself for this, rather than letting her change her gender as usual...

5.2 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

It had taken countless loops of careful study and preparation,earning two degrees in mechanical engineering and computer programming, three trips to safemode servers and one trip to Eiken as well as every amusphere he had. Then there was waiting for the exact perfect conditions to set his plans into motion, but here was at long last. His hands grasped the FullDive NerveGear, sliding it over his head, "Link Start!"

The darkness of his closed eyes was immediately replaced by light as colors flashed across his vision. Five status bars appeared, confirming his sight, hearing, taste, feeling, and sense of smell were now connected to the game. He selected Japanese as the language, then he mentally created his Shiroe account. A ' *Welcome to Elder Tales* ' sign appeared, followed by the materialization of the world around him. And then, there he stood, Enchanter Shiroe in the center of Akiba.

His mouth shaped into a pleased grin, looking forward to the next eight years.

Disappointing… that was the one word that could be used to describe it. On the one hand, he managed to jury-rig a NerveGear to allow full dive capacity into the Elder Tales game, but the results were...well...

He wouldn't say it was the worst 3-D game he ever played. No, just parts of the city were missing since the developers hadn't put it in the game, the turn based system was unbelievable and the NPCs had few expressions to cycle through (usually with just a happy face when casually talking to them or successful quest, sad face when requesting an adventurer's help or or a failed quest, and an angry face when you just committed a crime or when dealing with an enemy NPC). Unfortunately though, the worst aspect was the food,

since it was a tasteless wax once again. This time though, even cooking it in the provided kitchen did nothing to fix the problem.

Still, he shouldn't be too disappointed. The NerveGear was functioning, he could just modify his copy of the game, and the first thing to fix would be the food taste.

5.3 (LordCirce)

Shiroe grinned as he polished the side of his latest purchase. He had been hoping to show up in Astra Nova, the science fiction/space opera version of Elder Tales, for a while now, and his brand new Wind Skimmer was one of the major reasons.

Astra Nova featured travel much more heavily than Elder Tales, which made sense considering the fact that Astra Nova treated planets, or "spheres", much the same way Elder Tales treated areas. In the same spirit as the Half-Earth system, the Theldesian Galaxy was much smaller than the actual Milky Way, though it wasn't an exact ratio, and it didn't try to mimic the Milky Way all that much beyond general star names, and the location of Homeworld, placed roughly where Earth would sit in the Milky Way.

In a setting where travel was so heavily in demand, it was no wonder that the Wind Skimmer wasn't all that highly regarded. After all, it could only float around two meters above the ground, and it maxed out at a mere two hundred kilometers per hour. When most of the planets featured only a single type of terrain, and all major landmarks could be reached by spaceship, ground-bound transportation was regarded as a accessory at best, something to entertain novice players until they could purchase their first starcraft.

In Shiroe's case, however, the Wind Skimmer was brilliant, due to two factors. The first was the fact that the Wind Skimmer was classified as an item, meaning that he could carry it in either his Subspace Pocket or in his inventory. He had discovered with his

Tech-Staff from the previous loops that, as far as Bags of Holding from Elder Tales were concerned, items from the Astra Nova world didn't have any weight, which was an interesting perk. He couldn't wait to see Akatsuki and Naotsugu's faces when he pulled the Skimmer out of his side bag. The second factor was that it ran off of personal energy, i.e. mana, which meant he didn't need to stock fuel for when he left the Loop.

Each of the magic and healing classes had a variety of perks that allowed them to regenerate mana faster. Ordinarily, it was impossible to employ those perks together. However, thanks to his Looper sub-class, he could employ all of them if he wished to do so. It would raise eyebrows among other Adventurers for certain, but if he went riding around on a futuristic air-bike, their eyebrows would already be raised. If he used all of the perks he had for mana regeneration, the cost of powering the bike at a 'simple' cruising speed of 110 kilometers per hour would be virtually zero.

Shiroe smiled as he mounted the Skimmer and swung around to head east. He had a few ideas to test from some discussions with Ivory Scroll about encoding Law Magic into reality, and he would like to be a couple hundred kilometers from civilization before he tested them out. Below, the sun glinted off of the small barrel attached to the bottom of the Skimmer. The built-in blast gun was similarly powered by mana, and while it wasn't energy efficient in the slightest, he had plenty enough power to shoot and fly at the same time. The goblins would never know what hit them.

5.4 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

Using the Fairy Rings, Shiroe stood atop a lonely mountain at its pinnacle, gazing over the flat grassy field as far as the eye can see. He spoke into the headset, "Are you sure about this, John?"

"Positive," a gruff voice came back. The enchanter sighed as he opened his menu. On the Looper screen, his hand tapped on

summoner class, causing his white cloak to shift midnight black. "Don't say I didn't warn you when you respawn in the cathedral."

With another tap, his staff started glowing. A red light swirled within the field and a second later, an avatar of Kurama from Naruto's universe materialized. With a earsplitting roar, the bijuu's orange red chakra gathered on his mouth. His body bent over and unleashed a wave of red destruction that would destroy most cities.

5.5 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

"Faster, Lloyd," shouted Shiroe as Akatsuki rained sword strikes on the two sword user. "There are opponents in the multiverse that would make Mithos look tame in comparison! You're not even ready to face our swashbuckler, yet!"

Lloyd groaned, "Shiroe, I'd be a lot faster if I wasn't weighted down."

"Think of it like you've been paralyzed, given muscle relaxant or your fighting someone who can use gravity. You are a looper now, you have no limits! Those weights will one day save your life."

Ducking beneath Akatsuki's leg sweep aimed at his head, he brought both blades around to block her follow up with her ceramic dagger. The image of Raine overlayed the swordsman, his foot lashing out with enough force to send fully grown men to the ground. Against someone of Akatsuki's size, it would have sent her flying across the battlefield. Within a blink of an eye, Akatsuki released her grip on her dagger and planted her hand against his leg, lifting her away from danger. A blast of red energy sent Lloyd flying into the surrounding forest.

Shiroe sighed, "A behind your back shot, Akatsuki? That was low."

Akatsuki shrugged as she sheathed her Intelligent Device, Yoshi. "You said to not take it easy on him."

A flash of white light issued from where Lloyd landed, forcing Akatsuki to draw Yoshi again. She forced the attack skyward as the red cloaked warrior stepped forward, breathing heavily and covered in bruises. Shiroe nodded with a small grin planted on his face. "Again!"

And the battle continued as before, with Akatsuki landing blow after blow on the boy.

5.6 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

Sweat rolled off Raine like an ocean as she stood against several level 85 monsters, "Sacred Powers, cast thy purifying light upon these corrupt souls! Rest in Peace Sinners, JUDGEMENT!"

Light swirled around Raine as she tried manipulating the aim of the magic spell. A spell matrix formed for a second behind her made of pure white. A single pillar lanced forward from the matrix, obliterating one monster, before the spell petered out. Naotsugu patted her on the back, "Don't worry. You're already doing better than at the Pelennor Fields, being able to summon three of them. You're already making remarkable progress in just a month's time. Soon, you'll throw them around like Lina does Dragon Slave. ANCHOR...HOWL!"

The monsters immediately shifted their focus to the guardian and swashbuckler. The professor leaned against her staff, barely holding herself up. "Again..."

She stood on shaky feet with her hand outstretched. The white spell matrix started forming behind her. Nyanta folded his hands behind his back and looked to the sky. Speaking to no one in particular, he mused, "This anchor is spirited, nya. What will happen when she surpasses her limits, meow?"

5.7

Perched on the edge of a skyscraper, Akatsuki peered through binoculars at the city of Akiba.

She sighed.

Shiroe had not Awoken, and sending a ping had not returned any results. Another anchor had to be present. Either s/he was a stealthy jerk, or s/he was a newbie. Their loop had an slightly higher than normal probability of the latter occurring, at least according to Shiroe's analysis. Lazy or overworked admins seemingly took advantage of Theldesia's built-in tutorial.

Akatsuki pocketed her binoculars. She minutely shifted her stance, and then she leapt across the street to the next building and the next after that. All the while, she gazed about her to search for anything out of place.

Stopping by a large rooftop antenna, she withdrew her binoculars again. If she did not find anything by the end of the day, she planned to spend the rest of the loop in Australia hunting bunyips.

He sat on a boulder that had nearly been enveloped by a tree's roots. Fascinated by the sensations - it had been centuries since his last human life - he continuously traced the rough contours of the bark.

His stomach grumbled briefly. He tried to remember what that meant. Hunger? That sounded correct. He wondered if there were Twinkies in this world.

He slid his fingers over the bark again. Food could wait.

In a neighboring tree, Akatsuki examined the stranger and his odd fascination. Her mind distantly noted the young man's class (Druid) and race (Ceremonial).

Most people would think he was crazy or possibly drugged. Akatsuki thought that she had found her looper. To put it bluntly, a passing acquaintance with sanity was unfortunately normal.

She slid quietly from the tree and stopped at a distance that would let her dodge most reflexively-fired projectiles with a small blast radius. With his overlarge round glasses and scraggly, underfed appearance, she doubted he was a threat... but one could never tell.

Akatsuki cupped her hands around her mouth. "Excuse me. Would you mind if I asked you a few questions?" she called.

The man turned towards her and blinked. His movements were robotic and clumsy; she bet that his normal body was different from his Theldesian one. "Ah… Er… Sorry?"

As immobile as most of his face was, his eyes and body language conveyed that the man was flustered and almost certainly harmless. Akatsuki took the chance of coming closer. As she walked, she asked, "Are you a looper?"

"Looper…?" He frowned. Cocking his head in puzzlement, the man asked, "Definition?"

Akatsuki raised her eyebrows. He was very new, then. "Perhaps you should check your menu, sir," she suggested.

He scrunched his eyes and raised a questioning finger, but seemingly accidentally activated his status screen. With a certain wonderment, he said, "Menu? Humans… with built-in display? Not-human?"

"It's a feature of Theldesia," Akatsuki replied. She wondered what his body normally was like. "Try checking your memories of your life this loop. It might help you understand."

"Loop," he said again, drawing out the word as if tasting it. "Menu," he started, and then began again, correcting his grammar. "The

menu says that this unit - that *I* am a looper. I... want to know what the meaning is? Do you know why... I am now here?"

Akatsuki guessed that whatever the man - WALL-E, the status screen named him - usually was, he didn't necessarily follow human speech patterns. The loops being what they were, he might have had the chance to learn once, who knows how long ago, and was regaining proficiency thanks to practice or in-loop memories. Maybe both.

To answer his question, Akatsuki gestured helplessly. "Loops can be random and unpredictable. However, I will do what I can to help you." She reached the base of the boulder and pushed herself onto it. It was more than large enough for two.

"First," Akatsuki continued, "let me show you the tutorial…"

WALL-E beamed at the collapsed building to which Akatsuki had led him. Most of the 'ruins' in the town were traditionally maintained that way by the Lander residents, but the find in front of him was honestly trashed. A Summoner had tried testing his or her magic within city limits, Akatsuki had informed him.

It would be the perfect area for WALL-E to test his own magic.

Loops ago, WALL-E had replaced a boy named Ueki and gained the power to turn trash into trees. Accessing the divine magic in future loops had proven extremely problematic. Being a robot instead of a human had made everything trickier. He had previously had only limited success, about enough to make a thin sapling with significant effort expended.

But in Theldesia, the system pared away WALL-E's problems. He was human-ish - of the Ceremonial Tribe, actually, but certainly closer to human than his standard body. The world was packed with all sorts of magical abilities; as a Druid, WALL-E had links to plant magic already. Most importantly, the menu system allowed for a skill

to be used from the menu without having to figure out manual usage beforehand.

With a grateful nod to Akatsuki, he walked forward and laid a hand on a few pieces of broken bricks on the ground. Mentally, he 'clicked' on the Recycle skill in the menu.

The magic rushed through him and out his hand. The rubble instantaneously turned into wood and grew to an oak twenty feet in height. And the skill menu showed Recycle as having gained a few experience points.

WALL-E turned back to Akatsuki and gave her a wide grin.

She smiled back. "Good. What next?"

Without hesitation, he replied, "More practice." He would have the skill mastered by the loop's end.

A grumble rumbled across the clearing. WALL-E looked at his stomach with sheepish curiosity. "...After eating?"

Akatsuki turned her head and bit back a smile, gesturing for him to come along. She could take over someone's kitchen and make a good meal for them both.

Chapter Notes

5.1: Either this is early-ish loop where Shiroe hasn't stocked an emergency potion supply, or he used his entire stock in a quirky prank the last loop.

5.2: SAO's NerveGear is not fully *Elder Tales* compatible.

5.3: Shiroe in space! (Again.)

5.4: D.E.R's training loops, #1. *Halo* 's Master Chief versus a spell shaped like *Naruto* 's Kurama.

5.5: D.E.R's training loops, #2. Lloyd Irving from *Tales of Symphonia* . Who thinks Shiroe is messing with him?

5.6: D.E.R's training loops, #3. Raine Sage, also from *Tales of Symphonia* . The Pelennor Fields refers to a multicrossover war loop that was set in the *Lord of the Rings* 'verse.

5.7: WALL-E (of *WALL-E*) gets a walkthrough.

Chapter 6

AN: This is the last of the already-finished loop compilations at the moment.

6.1

Serara clutched her oak wand to her chest as she gulped in fear.

She thought she remembered last being in Akiba, but now she was back in Susukino? She did not see any sign of the Silver Sword guild's presence either, even though Maryelle had said that the guild had left to the north after dropping out of the Round Table Council.

Serara needed to get out of town quickly. However she had been teleported back, there would be no Nyanta to protect her. She began edging towards an empty alleyway. If nothing else, she might be able to rent a room in a Lander-owned inn and set restrictions to stop Demikas from getting to her until she could get in touch with Shiroe. It would be hard without food or water, but-

Her train of thought stopped abruptly when she overheard what the other people on the street were saying. The confusion, the despair - it was the same as it had been the day of the Catastrophe.

She shook her head, reasserting her courage. Getting to safety was still the most important thing. She could figure out anything else later. But, on her way, maybe she should contact Maryelle and see if she knew what was happening.

Serara pulled up her status screen, then stumbled and leaned against the chipped concrete of the nearby wall. Her eyes widened. She was only level 19 again. More importantly, her menu had entirely new options added.

A minute of reading later, Serara's knees grew too weak to support her. Sliding down the wall, she collapsed to the ground as she tried to comprehend what the menu told her. The sand and rocks grinding into her legs, the chill of the breeze, and the dull pain when she bit her lip made her present too real to be a dream.

Nevertheless, she couldn't - didn't want to - believe that she truly was back in Susukino, back before she had been saved by Nyanta or rescued by Shiroe. However, neither of them were on her friend list. She was all alone.

Serara trembled, and her eyes burned with suppressed tears. She did not know what to do.

Shiroe had once told her, "If you can't do something, then don't. Focus on doing what you can."

Serara loosened her grip on her wand and forced herself to stand up.

On her own, she could not overcome Demikas or Brigandia. She could not even escape from the town because the strength of the monsters in the Depths of Palm were too high for her to handle.

Nyanta and Shiroe, Maryelle and Henrietta - they would not have wanted her to just give up. She would not. The question was: what would she do?

Serara slid her finger across her menu and used the "Looper" options to set her level and skills back at their previous levels. Even a six level increase was better than nothing. Her Housekeeper subclass skills were much higher than her normal level; in a real world, such skills were useful. Brushing her hand against her clothes, she instantly cleaned them.

Then she squeezed her eyes shut. She tried to remember what had made Susukino into such a scary place so quickly the first time around.

Serara could not remember. It could have been any number of events. All she knew for sure was that she would have to be in hiding in around two weeks, likely less. The trouble started the day of the Catastrophe, but Demikas and Londark needed time to solidify the control of Brigandia over the city. They had concentrated on recruitment first.

Maybe she could find Nyanta and warn the Landers about Brigandia?

If Nyanta were here, what would he do? He would tell her to get somewhere safe, contact Maryelle, and come up with a plan.

Maybe she should have tried harder to avoid trouble. Maryelle had told Serara to stay safe until someone could rescue her.

However, when Serara had reluctantly left her temporary hideout in an inn to find some food, the nearly-empty roadway she had chosen had contained two members of Brigandia herding a female Adventurer into an alleyway. Serara knew what that meant.

She pulled out her wand and targeted the inside of the alley's entrance. *'Summon Servant: Myconid!'* she thought as the magic rushed through her.

Several humanoid mushrooms came into being between the men and the alley. They were somewhat cute - for a fungi. Like the complementary Druid attack "Fierce Mold", the standard gut reaction to their presence in real life tended to be more along the lines of "I don't want those to touch me" or "ew, get them away".

Judging by the faces of the Foxtail Cleric and Elven Guardian, they felt the same way. Their grip on the Wolfhair Bard loosened.

No Guards appeared as no one had injured another. Summoned servants did not have to use attacks.

Serara cupped her hands around her mouth. "Ma'am, run!" she shouted.

The Bard, startled, came out of her frightened daze and nearly managed to pull away. The Cleric cursed and grabbed at her, while the Guardian turned to Serara with a terrifying gaze. He sneered, "You're only level 25," he said before calling her a foul name that made her flinch back. "What do you think you can do to stop us? Or are you asking to join in?"

The Serara that she had originally been in the weeks following the Catastrophe would have cowered away and fled. That Serara had never seen combat. She had been a normal girl caught up in a situation beyond her understanding after barely having played her first serious MMORPG ever.

Training at Choushi, that Serara had fought undead skeletons and killed goblins. She had watched one of her friends nearly die for real. The Serara she was now was not the same Serara that had existed on the day of the Catastrophe.

Pushing past the fear that wrapped around her heart, Serara dug through her memories for half-remembered discussions. Dealing with threats in town had been a topic important to her friends from Log Horizon, and Isuzu had come up with a possible counter that might work for Serara here.

Serara looked the Guardian straight in the eyes and walked towards him, skirts hiding the trembling of her knees. She opened her mouth and spoke with barely any squeaks or stutters. In the most insulting manner she could manage, she repeated something she had once overheard a rowdy drunk say.

The Guardian punched her entirely on reflex. He stared at his fist in horror as Serara's HP decreased significantly from the difference in their levels.

His ally dropped the Bard and started backing away. "Shit. You idiot! I'm out of here." His boots pounded on the pavement as he ran.

Serara shakily stood up from where she had been thrown to the ground and cast a healing spell on herself.

A Royal Guard teleported into the street.

There were two levels of punishment carried out by the Guards: for simple injury, the attacker was teleported to a temporary prison; for killing, the attacker was also killed. In the latter case, if the Guard's target tried to resist arrest, the Guard escalated to killing the target.

The Guardian raised his sword at the Guardian. Panicking, the Guardian again did not think before striking out.

The next moment, the Guardian was dead of a stab wound through the heart. The Guard left as the Guardian's body dissolved.

The blood had drained out of Serara's face at the sight of the killing, but she pulled herself together and grasped the hand of the Bard. Gently, Serara tugged the Bard away from the alley. "Come on, we should leave. He might come back after he resurrects."

Dazed, the Bard followed.

A week later, Serara dined with Nyanta, the Bard, and the Bard's guild in one of Susukino's restaurants.

It had turned out that the Bard, Emlia, was the head of an all-level-90, all-female guild by the name of Blanketfort. Brigandia's attack on their leader, as well as Serara's stopping of it, had spurred them into fostering an anti-Brigandia movement. As only a little less than half of the players of MMOs were female and most men also disapproved of Brigandia's methods, the movement had been overwhelmingly successful.

Serara still was not quite sure how she had accidentally managed to stop Susukino from imploding, but as she sipped on tea made by an Unawake Nyanta, she found herself unable to mind.

"You look happy, nya," commented Nyanta as he poured more tea for Emlia.

Serara put her cup down with a quiet clink and beamed brightly. "Yes!" She reached for a cookie.

6.2 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

Shiroe held out a potion to Serara. "Serara, would you mind trying this?"

Nyanta looked at Shiroe with a curious expression while Serara took the potion and asked, "What is it?"

"My latest version of the appearance changing potion."

Akatsuki and Naotsugu flinched at how blunt the enchanter was. The girl looked confused. "Um, why do I have to try this?"

Akatsuki sighed. "Just give it to me, I'll have it."

Shiroe flinched back a bit. "That...would not be-"

With a gulp and a flash of light, Akatsuki now sported a long orange tail on fire as well as a vibrant orange red hair, cerulean eyes and a pair of wings. Shiroe sighed. "I wanted to see if she would change forms as she leveled up, but now you're in Charizard mode already."

Naotsugu chuckled, "Shortest Charizard ever."

Seconds later, the Guardian was running around, his bottom on fire and Akatsuki watched with a quiet grin. At least she had hands and

feet this time, plus the wings would be useful. Serara scooted closer to Nyanta, wondering what she had gotten herself into.

6.3

Jogging to keep up with Naotsugu, Serara puffed heavily in the crisp morning air. Though she had already upped her level as high as she could, Druids just did not have the stamina of Guardians. Serara used heals to maintain the pace, however, because Naotsugu had an oddly serious look in his eyes underneath his usual grin.

Serara always felt like such a kid compared to Shiroe, Akatsuki, and especially Nyanta. Both of the former had lived longer than Nyanta by now, but Nyanta showed his age and experience in ways that the others did not, not usually.

By contrast, Serara rarely felt like a kid compared to Naotsugu. He liked to be perverted and to joke around too much. But this loop, when he had asked Serara to accompany him on a trip to the Theldesian equivalent of England, Serara had instantly agreed.

Naotsugu could be serious. When he was, it was almost always on behalf of his friends.

Still, Serara did have some worries on her mind. "Are you sure Japan will be okay, Naotsugu-san?" she asked as they moved further along the mountain path. The path was too treacherous for horses, and dragonfly and butterfly mobs would swarm any flying mount.

Naotsugu slowed long enough to smile at her and pat her on the head reassuringly. "Yeah, no worries. I've met Asuna before. She's a good leader. If she needs to blow off steam, she plants to give one of her new swords a stress test against a Genius."

"What about Haruhi-san?"

Naotsugu shrugged. "Eh, wants a quiet loop to learn more skills here. Shiroe's met her before; says that she's pretty sane by any standard. She's not like that other Haruhi. Suzumiya or whatever. Fujioka's friends might take over some countries or something, but she keeps them in line. "

Older loopers had odd ideas of sane, normal activities.

It was a little weird looping without Shiroe present, Serara thought. She supposed she just had to trust the visitors like Naotsugu was.

They breached the highest part of the pass. The sight of the vast, hauntingly beautiful forest before her made Serara's breath catch in her throat. The land teemed with more magic than most of Theldesia. A deceptively delicate castle rose high at the other end of the wooded valley, and gigantic mushrooms and flowers broke through the canopy in irregular groupings.

Naotsugu grinned at Serara's awe. "Well, we're here. Welcome to Wonderland."

Serara realized her mouth hung open and hurriedly shut it. "Is there something important here?"

Naotsugu nodded. "You'll see. That magic thing I've been doing on the way here? It's something I learned from Akatsuki. I'll teach it to you before the end of the loop, too." He rolled his shoulders to loosen them, then drew his sword. "Stay close. It's easy to get lost here."

Much later, and with her pocket halfway filled with many interesting drops, Serara nervously looked about and clutched onto Naotsugu's side. Glowing eyes above sharp white grins filling the trees around them.

"Naotsugu-san, what are these?" she whispered anxiously.

Naotsugu gave her an unworried grin. "Cheshires," he replied with some satisfaction. "We've found what we came for." He pulled a contract out of his pocket and offered it and a pen to Serara. "Sign this, would you?"

"Um-"

"It's completely safe."

Serara nodded, then used Naotsugu's armor as a writing surface. Without reading the contract, she hastily scribbled her signature at the end.

She heard a confused yowl. Most of the smiling eyes vanished, but one gained the body of a purple kitten and fell out of its tree. If it had been with an adult, the parent had abandoned it.

Naotsugu walked forward, scooped it up, and plopped it down in Serara's arms. She had to hastily vanish the contract to her pocket in order to hold the kitten properly. It weighed more than most adult house cats.

"Naotsugu-san?" Serara yelped in surprise.

Naotsugu nodded with another smile. "Congrats! You're now Konyan's adoptive aunt."

Serara blinked at Naotsugu, then at the purple kitten that was docilely allowing her to hold it. She could tell the poor thing was as confused as she was. "Ko...nyan?"

"Yeah. We're trying to get her looping 'cause she turned into Nyanta's daughter this one time. Shiroe thinks it can be done if we keep working at it. Whenever we locate her here or on Earth, someone goes to find her."

Serara's eyes grew moist as she comprehended the implications of what Naotsugu said. "Poor Nyanta-san," she breathed as she

snuggled the kitten. Meeting Naotsugu's gaze firmly, Serara's resolve settled. "I will do my best as well."

Naotsugu's smile seemed more genuine as he crouched down to gently scratch the kitten's chin. The kitten purred and rubbed its head against his armor.

"Thanks, Serara-chan," said Naotsugu as he straightened and stretched. "Let's head somewhere fun next. A beach! Yeah, that'd be great. C'mon, let's go!"

As she rushed to follow, Serara did her best to hold the kitten steadily. "It's nice to meet you, Konyan-chan," Serara told her new… niece?

Just what, Serara wondered, had been in that contract?

6.4

Half the time, Shiroe never knew what his friends' names would be, not while they were on Earth. They did have their baseline names, ages, and occupations, but to Shiroe it seemed like the Theldesian side of the loop was much more stable than the Earth part.

Their Loop could be odd like that. On Theldesia, Akatsuki was Akatsuki. On Earth, Akatsuki was someone who had studied kendo and usually had a younger sister, but anything besides that? Shiroe could not depend on past knowledge.

That was why Shiroe found himself at the door of a professional dancer named Shindou Satoru. In the recently released *Elder Tales* beta, Satoru had a more familiar name - Nyanta - and he was Awake.

Shiroe knocked on the door and waited.

A young man soon cracked the apartment door open a crack. Nyanta's eyes widened. "Oya, oya. Shiroe-kun. You… actually look older than I expected," Nyanta admitted as he opened the door further.

Shiroe slipped in and began unstrapping the velcro of his shoes in the entryway. He looked, he knew, about fourteen years old. "I aged myself up some," Shiroe admitted as he bent down. "I didn't feel like reliving my childhood again."

Nyanta bolted the door shut before escorting Shiroe further inside. Nyanta agreed, "Three years of age would be an extreme change. Rather tedious, as well, to redo all of that schooling. Will your parents come looking for you?" He showed Shiroe to the dining room table, where two empty cups resting on either side of a steaming pot of fresh tea.

Shiroe knelt down opposite Nyanta. "No," Shiroe denied. "I kidnapped a child with a… malevolent family, wiped his memories," as well as years of trauma, Shiroe did not say, "and transformed him into a near clone of myself. The accident I staged should make the amnesia appear natural enough."

Some might have questioned Shiroe's ethics. Nyanta knew that Shiroe had likely saved the new Shirogane Kei's life, and the Anchor would have left evidence implicating the boy's abusers in his vanishment. Shiroe did like to be thorough.

Therefore, what Nyanta asked was, "Have you finished setting up your new identity?"

"Not quite," Shiroe admitted. "I wanted to ask you how you feel about moving to Chicago."

Nyanta inclined his head gracefully. "A change in scenery would not be amiss."

Shiroe smiled impishly. "Then, Uncle Satoru, will you please allow your cousin, Oshiro Kei, to move with you when you receive a job offer from the company of your choice?"

Nyanta raised his teacup to his lips. "I am sure America will be blindsided by our presence, Kei-kun."

It certainly would, Shiroe thought.

"However, I do wonder if this is the start of another attempt to buy out Atharva," Nyanta added, referring to the company that created *Elder Tales* . "It will be easier if you have an American background, will it not?"

Sheepish, Shiroe rubbed the back of his head. "That may have been a minor consideration," he allowed.

Nyanta gave a small laugh. "I look forward to your work," he said while making a silent toast with his tea.

Kei's fingers danced over the keyboard as he worked on a proposal for additions to the PvP system.

Attending high school in America hadn't been as bad as he had feared. The American system was less regimented, and he had the opportunity to take college-level courses early on. Socially, he had formed friendships when useful and dealt with any problematic situation easily.

If he had performed harmless psychology experiments on his classmates all the while… Well, it was valuable data, and it was important for a looper to avoid boredom in order to maintain the sanity of nearby individuals - anyone within an astronomical unit or so.

Attending school had forwarded Kei's main goal: to cement his identity before he took over Atharva. Scribe skills allowed him to

forge paper trails; years of experience and a little magical augmentation allowed him to hack electronic ones. Nevertheless, having a solid life that others could testify about helped ensure that no one discovered the earlier falsehoods. Memory spells took care of the rest.

Easily purchasing a controlling interest in Atharva using a fortune "inherited from a recently deceased relative" - in reality, stocks, accounts, and properties acquired less than legally - Kei soon maneuvered the CEO into putting the development team into Kei's hands.

The developers hadn't appreciated having an interloper invade their territory at first. Kei proved to them and the game community that he had the chops needed to do his job and do it well. His last-minute changes to the third expansion pack, the ocean-based Silver Odyssey, had attracted many new players and kept the old ones interested.

Four more years had passed since then.

Stretching, Kei took a break to check his phone for new messages. Moments after he unlocked the screen, a text popped up.

Serara: I do not like being treated like a kid at all!

Kei tapped out a reply.

Shiroe: …

The phone didn't respond for a minute. Then it buzzed with new messages.

Serara: I know I'm a kid right now.

She had recently celebrated her fourth birthday and then Awoke. The changes in her maturity had confounded her parents. They were

mostly just glad to have a better-behaving child, so they chose to ignore some of her eccentricities.

They had no idea she had her own phone.

Serara: And I know I said I wanted to stay with my parents.

Kei had offered to bring her over as his little sister or even as his daughter. She had refused, desiring to reconnect with her family.

Serara: But… They don't treat me seriously.

Serara: I even tried telling them about the loops.

Serara: It's all a game of make-believe to them.

Serara: And having to go to daycare every day annoys me so much.

Serara: Shiroe, please get me out of here.

Kei grimaced. He couldn't blame her for trying, and he couldn't really blame her parents for ignoring her story. A part of him did, still, no matter how unfair the thought was.

He wouldn't have believed anything like that before the Catastrophe, he knew.

At least he had prepared for Serara changing her mind.

Shiroe: Understood.

Shiroe: Keep calm for now.

Shiroe: Be ready in two days.

Serara: Thank you!

Shiroe: I do have one question.

Serara: ?

Shiroe: How old would you like to be?

Serara - Sara Oshiro now, and still four years old - slurped happily at her chocolate milkshake.

"Feeling better?" Kei asked wryly. Sara had managed to get the milkshake smeared across her face.

Sara nodded. Quite serious, she said, "Chocolate makes everything better."

In the few days since Sara had come to America, she hadn't much appreciated the differences in the food - not unless Satoru was cooking. Apparently, she had pickier tastes as a child.

Then, Kei had introduced her to a restaurant that made its own ice cream. It was a good thing she still had an active child's quick metabolism.

Sara peered into her now-empty cup and sighed regretfully. Kei laughed. They sat on the park bench in friendly silence for some time.

Later, Kei's phone beeped at him. He took it out, read the message, and put it back in his pocket with a satisfied smile. "Everything has been arranged for you to be homeschooled. Satoru is going to retire from being a dance instructor in order to keep you company."

Wanting to remain a child did not mean she wanted to be around children constantly. The three of them had agreed that sending her through the regular school system would be a disaster and, more importantly, too boring.

"He said he plans to take you traveling. I'm not sure where, but you do need something to keep you occupied for the next decade, right?"

Sara's eyes lit up. "Maybe… food tourism?" she squealed excitedly.

"I'm sure Satoru would agree."

Ten years passed.

In his office at the Atharva headquarters, Kei scrolled down the list of his accounts. The first served as his administrator account for making in-game appearances. Because of that, CastleK had the Blademancer class and other perks not available to normal players.

The other twelve he used for testing unreleased components on the moon server, their stats and skills kept to normal levels outside of the tests. They represented all races, at least one of each of the international classes, and a wide variety of subclasses. Out of nostalgia, the Summoner had Kei's normal Roe2 setup, and the Enchanter was, of course, Shiroe.

He didn't have time to actually play the game. His work kept him busy. In a few months, the *Homesteading the Noosphere* expansion pack would be released, and the Catastrophe would occur as usual - probably.

And then… Then, Kei would see what changes he had made.

Meanwhile, Sara sat in the spacious yard of their spacious house, sitting on a bench swing and kicking her legs back and forth.

Well, technically their house wasn't spacious - until Kei had magicked the insides to be bigger than the outsides. The yard, however, had the full benefits of years of exposure to a Druid's nature magic and specific anti-insect charms.

The charms allowed for bees. The plants needed pollinators, after all. But mosquitos? No. And fleas? Definitely not.

The last thing Konyan needed was fleas.

Reminded of their pet cat, Sara cast her eyes over the garden and found Konyan immediately. The cat - no longer young enough to be called a kitten - had gone into the catnip bed again and was happily rolling both in the dirt and over the plants. Sara smiled fondly at the sight.

If all went well, Konyan would travel with them into *Elder Tales* . Kei had a digital copy of their entire property, including a Cheshire avatar for Konyan, stored on one of the servers.

But for now, Sara turned her attention to Satoru, who had come out of the house with two bowls. She gladly scooched over on the bench to make room for him.

Satoru sat down, as graceful as always, and presented one of the bowls to Sara. She took hold of it and the spoon in it. Then she scooped out a piece of the chilled fruit and melted in happiness at the mango-banana-papaya flavor.

It was not a tropical fruit. They had not learned of the pawpaw until they tired of constantly traveling around the world and returned home to Kei. As it turned out, he had purchased the house because the tree in their backyard.

After that, Satoru and Sara made sure to always be home during the harvest season.

When the last sliver of fruit had been consumed in comfortable silence, they set aside their bowls. Konyan jumped into Satoru's lap and stretched out, purring and kneading her claws into the thick denim of his jeans.

Finally, Satoru spoke. "Eight months until the Catastrophe."

"Mm." Sara looked up at the afternoon sun. "It's been nice, living on Earth like this. I forgot how much I missed it." She reached over to

scratch Konyan's head. "It's still feels weird to not go out and fight monsters at all."

Despite his greater years, Satoru could not disagree. One became used to fighting very quickly, he found, and battle instincts meshed not at all within the peaceful borders of a modern first-world country.

That one time their culinary tourism had unexpectedly put them in the middle of a civil war, on the other hand, was an entirely different manner. (He doubted any of that raiding party would ever rest whilst under trees again. Sara had taken offense to their behavior.)

To Sara, Satoru advised, "I would not think too much on it. You will have more early loops, and more time to live how you wish. For now, let us enjoy life on Earth."

It was a good day.

The Catastrophe occurred on schedule.

Shiroe's eye twitched. The Enchanter was not having a good day. Part of the reason could be explained by the wonderful view of Earth he had, being on the moon as he was.

The other reason - rather, the other twelve reasons - stood around him in a circle as Konyan watched in feline curiosity. She understood neither why there were suddenly thirteen of one of her humans nor why some of them smelt so strange.

Shiroe looked at himself in many different forms and sighed. The other twelve hims sighed at the same time.

They could read each others' minds, but their synchronicity grew from their identical thought processes. They spoke out loud to help themselves think straight.

"Right, the loop memories from this are going to be weird," they all said as one. "We need to focus on different things. One of us per region? Count off."

"North American server," CastleK the Half-Alv Blademancer said.

Shiroe chose Japan. The Western European server ended up in the care of a Ceremonial Summoner named JinnJester, while Northern Europe went to Roe2. Every version of Shiroe claimed a separate server as their region. However, the moon would be the base for them all.

Their thought process continued. "Genius monsters? Changes in authorities of the Thirteen Chivalric Orders should allow Landers to properly combat them. Watch out anyways. Form a guild? CastleK's admin powers have been removed. However, the moon has no restrictions requiring use of guild center. Done."

The members of the newly-founded Log Horizon guild smirked at each other.

"Let's see what we can do."

Twelve of them drew upon their magic and teleported to their new homes. CastleK remained with Konyan. He picked her up, as her size this loop only equaled that of a rather large Maine Coon. While heavy, level 90 stats easily took the strain.

"Nyaaa….?" Konyan asked, having not yet realized that she could speak. Adjusting to full sapience tended to be understandably disorienting for the animal; she did not have memories of loops to draw upon.

CastleK held her close. "We're going to find your papa and Serara now. Don't worry. Everything will be fine."

And then he vanished with her, leaving the yard empty.

A few loops on, Shiroe told Akatsuki, "I sort of took over the world within a few months."

Akatsuki smiled and chuckled a little. "Hah. With thirteen of you, my lord? You were taking it easy. Duck!"

Shiroe dropped to one knee.

The deku nut from Akatsuki's slingshot smashed the fire keese right in its fangs just beyond where Kei's head had been. It dispersed into black smoke. A golden object dropped from its midst.

Shiroe caught the key in one hand without looking. "You might be right," Shiroe admitted to Akatsuki with a laugh. "I'll do a speed run next time."

It might take many more loops, but surely there would be a next time. Akatsuki shrugged and followed Shiroe out the door.

A thought crossed her mind and made her pause momentarily. Shiroe had always been politically active, but nothing could stop her from doing the same if she wanted. Akatsuki had never truly contemplated taking that path. However…

...It was something to consider, at least, if the opportunity presented itself.

6.5 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

Shiroe removed a potion from his subspace pocket and tossed it to the bald headed leader of the KND loops, "Tsun Zhu was one of the greatest Chinese generals who ever lived. He said, *'Know yourself and know your enemy and you can fight one hundred battles without disaster.'* Drink that, if you desire to learn my strategies."

Nigel took one look at the potion and gave Shiroe a dubious look, "I'm not drinking something like this, *Black Hearted Shiroe,* otherwise known as the villain in glasses. You probably poisoned it as a case in point lesson."

Shiroe's mouth curled into an approving smirk, "Good, you have done your homework. You will go far in the field of strategy, I can tell. Loopers know themselves, so you must learn about your enemy. Who is your enemy?"

Nigel's face turned sour, "Adults."

The enchanter shook his head, "No. There are indeed quite a few evil adults in your loops. But you've met adults who are not evil. By name, who are your enemies?"

And so, the boy listed every known enemy of the Kids Next Door. He spent the rest of the day grilling him on their strengths, their weaknesses, their likes and dislikes, everything and every detail Nigel could come up with. Within a week, he had several lists of things to research along with books written by leaders, famous generals and warriors, politicians, and all kind of people from every walk in life to read through the loops. In many ways, Nigel both hated it since these lessons reminded him of school, but at the same time he felt himself become better, a better leader and strategist. Although Shiroe was a harsh teacher, he was never unfair and always seemed to know when Nigel neared his breaking point.

As for practical learning, Nigel was in charge during loop scenarios, dealing with the Round Table, the Ice Palace and the 'Rise of the Goblin King.'

6.6

Serara frowned at her menu. She had that many skill points to use?

The Log Horizon guild house this loop was a little dingy. Cleaning it as she was now would take a while. Levelling her Housekeeper job past the normal limits could not hurt, surely.

Her status screen informed her that the job skills had reached 128. That was higher than she expected. Being such a high level Housekeeper would make her a perfect housewife, right?

Feeling her cheeks heat, Serara clasped her hands on her broom and steadfastly tried to stop thinking about Nyanta. She swept her broom rapidly against the floor four times. She stopped on the fifth.

She didn't want to risk anything more. It was important for the floor to still exist, after all.

Any dust on the entire floor had vanished. Serara could see herself reflected off of the wooden boards. They shone like she had spent days oiling and waxing them and had refreshed their varnish for good measure.

Suddenly, it occurred to her that perhaps stepping on such a clean floor could be potentially hazardous. She gingerly inched one slippered foot forward.

Serara barely had time to scream before her head met the wall.

6.7 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

Before every training session, Shiroe holds a meeting in their guild's dining room. Minori was allowed to sit in on this one, since it involved the person who replaced Touya, a blonde older man from a particularly nasty universe called Attack on Titan in the Hub.

Hannes

Human

Lv 15 Swashbuckler

Lv 20 Carpenter

The strategist held a quill in hand and asked, "So what kind of training do you want?"

Hannes sighed. "Please train me in fighting with two blades."

Shiroe quirked his eyebrows, causing Hannes to elaborate. "I once replaced Levi as captain of Levi Squad, the best Titan slaying unit in the Survey Corps. Even though I tried doing what Eren told me and letting my loop memories and instincts guide me, I didn't survive my third encounter with the Titans. Loop memories seem to only go so far. Mikasa told me she took over for my position for the rest of the loop and things turned out alright. But I don't want to be a burden on them anymore. I want to be able to stand on their level and protect humanity."

Nyanta nodded. "Oya, oya, I can respect that, meow. I've been to your universe once, perhaps you could give me pointers on your 3D maneuver gear."

At this point, Minori shouted, "Shiroe, this is insane! I brought Hannes here when I saw your poster on the tree, and I thought you would help council him, not play along with them!"

Shiroe gave her a sad look. "Minori, if Hannes were actually insane, we would give him counseling. But he really is repeating time over and over again. Your brother in the universe I first started in was named Tohya."

Minori blinked in surprise as she whispered to herself, "Mom told me once that Hannes almost got named Tohya, but after a young German gentleman pushed her out of the way of a car during his first month of pregnancy. He was hit instead. She named him after that German man."

Shiroe acted like he didn't hear what she said, though his smile did drop a bit. When she turned her attention to him again, the strategist raised his hand to her, "Perhaps this will convince you."

He placed his hand above the table, mentally reaching into his subspace pocket and calling forth an item. A computer phased into existence. The girl's eyes bugged out, "This is-!"

The device whirled to life as Shiroe chuckled, "Loopers like us can carry items between loops in what we call a subspace pocket. Over time, it grows bigger and allows you to carry bigger and bigger items."

He held out his hand against a nearby wall, allowing an oaken door to materialized. "With enough practice, you can even enter your subspace pocket. Would you like to see?"

The door swung open, revealing a study packed with countless books, a portable electric generator, a desk where a laptop used to sit, and countless other items arranged neatly. Minori blinked several times, reaching through the door, but pulling her hand out. "I...this is too much, Shiroe. I need some time to take this all in."

She walked for the stairs to her bunk, turned for a second to Hannes. She opened her mouth to speak, but closed it and walked up the stairs. The tears in her eyes, however, left nothing that needed saying.

After she left, Hannes lowered his head, to which Nyanta put his hand on his shoulder. "Sometimes, the loops are not kind, Nya. I myself had a daughter named Konyan. She was a normal cat in the human world, but she was sentient in this world. When a new loop begins, I search for the same cat, and bring her into the game world. I hope one day to have her looping with us."

Hannes spoke in a mournful tone. "Loop memories are powerful. I remember when she looked after me at the hospital, the joy we had in playing this game where I could actually walk, her always standing

up for me. I was there, but I wasn't. But that Hannes, loved her deeply. In many ways, I feel the same. But when the loop resets, I know I won't be there for her. Shiroe, when I return to my world, take care of Minori for me."

Shiroe nodded. "You don't even need to ask. Minori is like a sister to me too, and I would never let anyone hurt her."

The evening passed with Shiroe and Hannes discussing the finer points of their training, then Shiroe asked for some training in 3D gear since he had never visited the Titan Universe. Both Hannes and Nyanta were fine with it. After everyone else went to bed, Shiroe walked up the stairs, looking to the door where Minori rested. He paused at the door, uncertain as what to do, only for a female voice to echo from beyond, "Shiroe, would you come in, please?"

The strategist replied in the affirmative. Minori was still in her Kannagi outfit, sitting on her bed. Shiroe took a seat at the table. "Are you alright?"

Minori's eyes were red from tears, and silence reigned for several seconds. When she finally spoke, she asked, "What am I supposed to do? Hannes was my brother. I loved him like the world, and he's not even from this world."

Shiroe leaned back, "Not quite. The looper Hannes is indeed not from this world, but Hannes is still Hannes, no matter which world he's in. He was born here, raised in this universe, and he only gained memories and abilities from another world. I feel he'll never stop being your brother, even when he's in his own world. He remembers those moments you spent with him, and he'll treasure them. Hannes comes from a brutal world, where humanity is trapped within three walls like a cage. He has seen friend after friend die every loop. Those times he spent with you will keep him sane, will get him through some of those more difficult moments, and knowing you're safe from a world like his will give him strength to go on."

The anchor spoke with such force it staggered her.

"How...how can you say that with such conviction?!"

Shiroe's sad grin returned. "Because I've been to worlds like his. A world where chaos reigns and gods consider humans nothing more than pawns and playthings in their struggles to conquer the universe. A world where humanity is hanging on by just a thread in the face of a zombie virus. A world where atomic weaponry are but a fire crackers and entire mountains can be obliterated with but an application of force."

He ruffled her hair. "Those times spent in Theldesia, with the people of Akhiba, and especially my guild mates here in Log Horizon keep me sane, knowing I have a home I will be returning to one day, no matter if I have to wait a thousand years."

Minori gasped. "You've spent a thousand years in a loop before?"

The boy chuckled, "Remind me to tell you the time I was Prince of Equestria, a universe devoid of humans inhabited by sentient ponies, griffons and other mythical and real beings."

Minori thought for a second, then turned hesitant. "Could you...well, would you be willing...to tell me about Tohya?"

Shiroe's sad grin turned happier. "Anytime."

A year of training passed with Hannes skill evolving in leaps and bounds. Shiroe took him and the rest of Log Horizon guild to the cliffs beyond the Depths of Palm, just as the sun began rising. It probably wouldn't be long before the loop ended, and Shiroe enjoyed showing this place to visiting loopers as a final present to them. Hannes rested against the cool stone surface and let the ocean breeze wash over him. "I wonder if there's an ocean beyond the wall back home."

Shiroe shrugged. "Who knows? As the expansions continue, more of your baseline will be revealed. Until then, you should explore. Yggdrasil fills in those kinds of details. One loop, you may discover an ocean a thousand miles from the wall, maybe mountain ranges the next loop after and finally a desert larger than the Sahara."

Hannes gave a pleased grin. "Maybe I'll take Eren, Mikasa and Armin with me, steal a couple survey horses and ride as far as they'll take us."

"Um-"

Minori walked up, standing over Hannes. "Hannes, I...thank you for being my brother. I've thought a lot about it, and Shiroe was right. You're my brother, and I love you. Please, be careful when you go home, and someday...when you return here, you'll be my brother again...even if Tohya is my brother."

Hannes nodded. "Yeah, you can have more than one brother after all. You'll have to take care of me then too, since I'm a hopeless drunk back in my universe...baseline anyway."

This caused Minori to start lecturing her older brother, making Shiroe and the others of Log Horizon laugh.

6.8

He had baked the bread too long. It sucked the moisture out of his mouth and had a taste that hinted he had almost turned it to charcoal on the bottom. He did not have any jam, butter, or condiments with which to flavor the loaf.

Naotsugu crunched determinedly into the day-old bread anyway. Despite its problems, it beat Theldesian food hands-down. It still sucked, but it was a bearable amount of suckiness.

Damn, he thought to himself, *I knew I should have practiced after that food Loop.* He hadn't done much cooking after Awakening that loop, instead focusing on partying the loop away in some very exotic locations. *Very, ahem, friendly, too,* he reminisced warmly.

Naotsugu was good with potions, poultices, and medicines. He wasn't half-bad at brewing either. By contrast, plain cooking bored him. He might finally put in some effort to expand from his minimal repertoire. Maybe. He did have other options in his subspace pocket.

A couple weeks ago, he had Awoken along a road to one of the headquarters of the Thirteen Chivalric Orders, apparently on his way to try and join it. He had been a Lander, not an Adventurer, and checking current events had told him that he was more than eight years before the Catastrophe - by Earth's reckoning.

Some independent monster hunting sounded like a great idea. Naotsugu wondered briefly how the game and the gamers would interpret his presence back on Earth.

He grinned at the thought. Maybe Shiroe would tell him later.

Serara had tried to stay at her job like nothing had changed after she Awoke. She really had. Being a housekeeper at an inn was something she did not mind doing, even if most of the customers were the creepy shells the gamers had unknowingly puppeted before the Catastrophe.

But after giving the same quest to an Adventurer for the, probably literally, thousandth time, she set down her tray at the bar with an echoing clank.

Her boss looked up from his endless polishing of mugs with surprise. "Serara? What's wrong? Your shift isn't over yet."

She bowed. "Sorry, but I'm quitting!"

"What-"

She turned to go.

He reached out and grabbed her shoulder. "But, Serara, if those oni aren't fought off, the outpost will be overrun! The Adventurers won't know what to do without you here. We can't hire a new worker that quickly!"

Serara broke free of his grip with an easy smile and a shrug. "Don't worry. I will beat the boss on my own to give you enough time."

The barman's eyes widened at the thought of an untrained Lander managing such a feat. "But-"

She stopped hiding her Adventurer status and leveled to 70 so fast that every non-Adventurer in the room had their jaws meet the floor. A little pleased by their reactions, she curtsied and swapped to better equipment - fit for a Druid, not a maid - by the time she had bent her knees.

Serara strode out the door before anyone found anything to say. It swung shut with quiet finality in her wake.

Chapter Notes

6.1: Serara is not sure what is happening, but she is enjoying it anyways.

6.2: It's a good thing that Akatsuki likes dragon(-type Pokémon).

6.3: Always read the fine print.

6.4: Twenty years early? Plenty of time to mess with the system.

6.5: D.E.R's training loops, #4. Nigel from *Kids Next Door* .

6.6: Serara makes a clean sweep.

6.7: D.E.R's training loops, #5. Hannes from *Attack on Titan* .

6.8: Serara and Naotsugu: 100 years offline. To be continued.

Chapter 7

AN: This chapter is different from the others because it is all one loop. (Chapter 7 is a continuation of 6.8.) It clocks in at a somewhat unusual (for a loop) 38 pages. Chapter 8, which returns to separate loops, will be posted simultaneously.

7.A

Naotsugu pulled his sleeping quarters out of his subspace pocket and onto the ground in front of him. He made sure that the wheel blocks were in place and stuck the portable stairs against the bottom of the door.

Sure, it was more like a trailer converted into a house than one of the luxury tents from the Hogwarts Loop, but it had a water tank, a working toilet, and a generator. Not only were there no monsters in the area that could attack it, thanks to Naotsugu's earlier efforts, but he'd gotten Shiroe and some other more magic-inclined loopers to layer down enough protective enchantments that sleeping in it was as safe as taking a break in a tent in any old JRPG.

The portable house was something that Naotsugu used for road trips back on Earth. It was nice, safe, and had all the comforts of home.

More importantly, it had a fridge stocked with beer, a freezer full of frozen dinners, and a working microwave. Naotsugu walked up the stairs and popped open the door. With one last fond look at the fantastic mountain scenery, he shut the door behind him.

Serara crouched down with one knee touching the ground. Living vines trailed from the ground near her feet and across the river in

front of her. She rested her palm against the largest one, waiting quietly.

The vines went taut. Serara looped the vine around her palm and pulled sharply.

Simultaneously, she flooded the vines with her druidic magic and gave them an order. Her magic enhanced them, making them powerful and deadly.

The glowing vines rose above the water, a monstrous fish longer than five men caught in the improvised net. Unable to breath in the air, the fish king gasped and sent waves of magical attacks against the vines. Powered by Serara, they resisted and healed the damage in moments. In moments, the vines flowered, brilliantly blue and indigo, and released their soporific pollen.

Truthfully, the vines were a local monster she had co-opted for this venture. They had fought her at first before her magic put them in her control.

Serara's magic remained steady as she shifted the vines further. The fish had decimated the local wildlife and even killed some Landers that had tried to expand into its territory. Still, it deserved as painless a death as possible.

The vines dropped the sleeping, dying fish onto the ground in front of her. Serara gently traced its iridescent scales.

"This is a shame," she whispered to it, her eyes downcast. Aside from the mouth full of oversized shark teeth and the razor-sharp fins, the long, sinuous body of the fish king was a wonder to behold. She could not find any joy in its demise.

It breathed its last breath quietly in its sleep like a gentle sigh. Gold and treasures - the rewards for its defeat - appeared next to its carcass. Butchering it would grant even more treasures if local

legends held any truth. The tales said it had swallowed many artifacts that yet resided in its stomach.

If Serara harmed the corpse, it would immediately decompose, and the fish king would respawn in a few months. In a year, it would be as powerful and dangerous as ever.

Serara stepped across the damp grass of the riverbank towards the fish king's head. She clapped her hands together in prayer, and then she flung a sacred rosary, scavenged from the ruins of a nearby monastery, over the head of the fish king in accordance with the rosary's flavor text.

The fish king's body stiffened. The rainbow scales slowly darkened and dulled until Serara could no longer call the body a carcass. Instead, it was a great expanse of stone. The rosary crumbled into dust.

Serara stretched. A yawn surprised its way out of her mouth, but her stomach grumbled unhappily. Setting up the trap had taken most of the day. She had forgotten to eat again. She blushed as she poked her stomach.

Usually, her stomach became a little chubby thanks to Nyanta and his wonderful food. Being on her own encouraged her to diversify her own selection of recipes, but all the exercise and her irregular schedule encouraged her body to slowly firm up. It was a little unsettling; her body had never before had the chance to change in quite the same way.

Serara shook her head to shrug off the feeling. It was pointless to worry.

Slipping a red apple out of her magic bag, she took a large bite of its deliciously crisp flesh. The sweet and tart fruit would be enough to tide her until she made dinner. It would likely be some small menu-made Lander dish - better than vitamins for supplying necessary nutrients - with some real roasted fish on the side for flavor.

She eyed her surroundings and went to set up her camp for the day. With the river calm, it would be nice to spend the rest of the afternoon fishing near its edge.

The next day's evening found Serara in the nearest village. Due to not being accessible by the Adventurer avatars, the villagers relied on the standard safe zone protection and sheer stubborn will for their survival.

Nevertheless, they did not regard outsiders with the suspicion she had encountered in other towns. The villagers called greetings to Serara as she made her way down the windswept, cobbled main street to a general store she had frequented before. It was where she had first heard of the fish king.

An old woman and her husband sat on rough-hewn rocking chairs outside the front door. "Ah, Lady Serara!" the woman exclaimed joyfully in her husky, aged voice. "How go your travels?"

Next to the woman, the old man leaned forward intently, peering at Serara as he attempted to deduct her recent options. Though the villagers accepted her presence, no one really knew what to do with an ensouled Adventurer whose level surpassed all but the knights of the Chivalric Orders. Serara accepted that they would look at her with both respect and fear.

She did wish they would grow used to her a little more, just a bit; however, she knew her next statement would not help that goal. She replied, "The Gravel River King is sealed, Delia-san. The rosary from the shrine you mentioned turned him to stone."

"Eeeeh!" Delia clapped her hands together loudly. She nudged her husband with her elbow. "See, I told you she'd do it, Rosso! And you didn't even believe the River King was real!" Delia laughed. It came out as something like a cackle.

Rosso scowled at her antics, then brightened. He stood abruptly. Despite his age, his back was straight and arms well-defined. "So you did. I will need to inform the other men that the river is open for trade and fishing again." He nodded to Serara. "My thanks, Lady. Perhaps I will finally see this town thrive." He strode off.

Delia sighed and rolled her clear blue eyes as she watched him move out of sight. "Sometimes I think the idiot still thinks I married him for his muscles." She winked at Serara, and Delia's face when she smiled made it obvious why her daughter was the current town beauty. "Not that seeing those hurt," Delia cackled smugly.

Then Delia's face turned contemplative. "Well now. He's not wrong about what that means for this town. We appreciate it. Ah, but you didn't come here to hear an old woman chatter. Are you here for Naomi?"

Serara nodded with a smile. "I picked up a few things that I don't need. I was hoping I could sell them to her."

Delia nodded in return and shooed Serara inside, but not before wrangling a promise from the Adventurer to go to the Lander's house for the evening meal.

Pushing the sturdy wood door open, Serara stepped inside the well-lit interior of the store. The shelves had originally held few items. Serara's patronage and hunting of nearby monsters had already helped to turn the family's fortunes for the better.

Still, Naomi, the owner of the store and daughter of Delia, diligently cared for the store on her own when she could have hired another. The care with which she was currently dusting the cabinets spoke of how much she loved her work.

The bell attached to the door rung daintily as it shut. Naomi turned around, brushing a strand of brown curls back under the handkerchief tied atop her head. "Ah! Lady Serara! Welcome back," Naomi greeted with a wide smile as she stepped off her footstool

and went behind the counter. She leaned over it eagerly. "What are you interested in selling today?"

Naomi was truly a shrewd businesswoman. While she knew how to haggle a price better than anyone else in the village, haggling over the sales price of the items that Serara brought in did not make sense in the Lander system. The Kunie clan ran the bank, and they controlled the funds that flowed between Landers and Adventurers as well in most circumstances.

For Adventurer-to-Lander sales, the menu system appraised the item and named the sale value for that location. With the sale completed, the gold transferred from the Kunie clan vaults while the item transferred to the vaults, from where the Kunie clan would facilitate the sale to interested parties. They took a cut of the profits and transferred the rest to the store that had made the sale.

The first time, Naomi had not known how to use the system, having never encountered an Adventurer before. She had learned quickly with Serara's help.

Serara unloaded the unwanted items gained from her last week of monster hunting from her inventory on top of the counter. She kept any rare non-perishable materials in her subspace pocket as a matter of course, just in case they proved of use in a future loop. However, any common goods - excesses of ingredients, lower-quality materials, basic weaponry - she preferred to sell as quickly as possible.

If she were honest with herself, she had to admit that her definition of "rare" grew pickier with every loop.

Still, fighting her way through the wilds gave her quite a lot to sell. Both Serara and Naomi flew through the menu options to complete the transactions as quickly as possible. By the end, both were significantly more well-off than when they started.

A few bundles of items, things that Naomi could resell locally or use herself, remained on the table. These, Naomi paid for through a separate option that used the money in her personal vault - enchanted by the Kunie clan to link to the bank system, but located in her store.

When that was done, Serara pulled out one more item and set it on the counter. It was a large slab of fish flesh wrapped in wax paper. Serara smiled at Naomi. "This isn't for sale. But, your mother invited me over for dinner today, and I would like to borrow your kitchen to cook this. Do you mind?"

Naomi looked blank. "I thought chefs could use the menu to do that anywhere. And… this looks pretty rare. Wouldn't it be a waste to eat it?"

Serara blinked, then smacked her own forehead. "I've never shown you how to really cook, haven't I?" She punched a fist into the open palm of her other hand. With a determined face, she said, "Just wait! Tonight, you'll be amazed!"

Hours later, Naomi was. So were Delia and Rosso.

Naomi's husband, Jenk, was beyond that. He was nearly groveling at the foot of Serara's chair at the dining table. "Please, milady, teach me your secrets!"

Serara took a peek at the table. Not even a crumb was left on any of the dishes.

"I think… I need to start with the basics," Serara slowly replied. "Do you think anyone else would want to learn?"

Naotsugu had wandered for a few years when he noticed something weird.

Landers had expanded beyond menu actions. Trawling through a town without an Adventurer presence, Naotsugu found carpenters carving decorations, tailors sewing clothes, and the wafting smells of real, delicious food. Questioning those who had the skills lead him on a slow, meandering trail that lead to a former backwater village by the name of Stonethrow.

He had to say "former backwater" because it was anything but anymore despite its slightly hard-to-find location in the middle of a North American mountain range.

After Serara - of all people, Serara? - had managed to permanently kill off what should have been a raid boss on her own, the town had prospered for two reasons. First, the river could be used for trade again.

Second, Serara had started teaching Landers how to do things for real. That had attracted students. Some of the students had stayed to experiment with what Serara couldn't teach and ended up teaching others in turn.

The only term that Naotsugu could think of for a place like that was "college town". And Serara was the dean.

Or that was his impression, at least. Serara basically owned the village in every way that mattered. The mayor, apparently one of Serara's former students, followed her lead. So did the nearby towns.

Shiroe could take over the world through politics and contracts. It was a little scary to realize that Serara's clout resulted all from good food and home comforts, and not even the food-based maneuvering that Shiroe pulled in the baseline.

Naotsugu stepped through the wide-open city gates and announced his presence to Serara with a ping.

Serara carefully laid slices of pineapple down on a mix of butter and brown sugar when she stiffened. "Oh my!" she exclaimed.

Jenk, current mayor of Stonethrow, raised his fountain pen up from the stack of paperwork on the kitchen table that he had been sorting and signing. "Lady Serara? Is something wrong with the food?"

Serara turned, her apron-covered pink cotton skirt swirling with the movement. "No, I think there's someone here to see me." She turned again and began vigorously washing her hands under the sink. "I think it's an old friend!" she called cheerfully over the sound of running water.

"Oh, anyone I know?"

Serara shut off the sink. She hastily wiped her hands on a nearby dish towel as she replied, "I wouldn't think so." And then she hurried out the door.

She knew that Jenk, curious as always, would get up to follow her, but Serara's mind was too busy to worry about what other people thought of her swift walk - perhaps a slow jog - through the village streets. She wondered who had sent the ping. Was it Shiroe? Akatsuki? Maybe, just maybe, Nyanta?

Sunlight reflecting off high-quality armor caught her attention. Serara buried any disappoint as she slid to a halt on the cobblestones.

"Naotsugu-san!" she greeted, the honorifics that she had not used in over a year wiggling their way back into her speech. (Almost all Landers spoke the same language worldwide, but honorfics and titles varied by location.)

Naotsugu caught her up in a bear hug and swung her around as she laughed. "Nice to see you again, Serara-chan," he said as he set her down. "How's life?"

"It's good! But, I'm glad you are here. While I wasn't alone," she made a helpless gesture instead of finishing her sentence. She thought Naotsugu would understand. Delia and Naomi and the rest were a joy to know, but in a hundred years, Naotsugu would still be around.

Naotsugu nodded. He agreed with "Yeah," then added teasingly, "I have to admit, I never saw you as the country-conquering type. Got bored?"

Serara flushed, horrified, then sputtered, "W-what? I am just helping! I have not taking over any country…"

She trailed off as she mentally reviewed some meetings she had had over the past couple of years. And - did mayors normally operate out of someone else's kitchen?

Serara turned to Jenk with pleading eyes. "Right?"

Jenk muffled an embarrassed cough behind his hand. "Well, Lady Serara, you might be doing that," he admitted apologetically, "just a bit."

Serara flinched.

Jenk hastened to reassure her, "You haven't actually taken over anything officially!"

Judging by her reaction, Jenk admitted to himself that his words could have been better chosen. He tried again.

"Everyone wants to listen to you because you have done so much for us and have made us more than we were. You are an Adventurer, but you are our Adventurer."

Serara wiped at her eyes. "I'll continue to do my best!" she exclaimed earnestly with a slight bow.

Naotsugu laid a hand on her shoulder. "I have some job skills that you don't yet. Don't be afraid to ask for help."

Serara nodded determinedly. "Right!" She smiled. "Then, I hope I can depend on you!"

She absently bit at the knuckle of her thumb as she began to think. Besides his official subclass, Border Patrol, Naotsugu was a good pharmacist and a great architect. Serara's mind drifted from her worries, focusing on who most needed what Naotsugu could teach.

Naotsugu smiled wryly as Serara sunk back into her responsibilities. Her posture lost its nervousness and turned both serious and contemplative. She looked different than usual. "Guess she's really growing up," he murmured quietly to himself.

On Earth, Nyanta spoke with Shiroe over *Elder Tales* ' voice chat. "All these changes are a little unusual, nya," Nyanta observed. In-game, his avatar effortlessly cut through some low-level mobs. They were gathering ingredients for further experimentation with the production system.

"Eh," Shiroe's voice replied, "it shouldn't mean anything. Variants happen."

Nyanta huffed in amusement. "True. Anything could explain minor differences in the game. However, I was talking about the next expansion pack, nya. There have been… major revisions."

"They did a press release already?" Shiroe asked. "I haven't kept up."

Even though he knew Shiroe could not see him, Nyanta shook his head in amusement. "You really should look, nya."

Shiroe's avatar went still. In the current area, there was no danger, and Nyanta knew Shiroe had a three-monitor configuration in his

house this loop. Shiroe would return if a problem arose. "Let's see… So, instead of 'Eternal Lind Red', we have 'Lore of the Wanderer'. And…"

He fell silent.

Nyanta chuckled. "Saw the cover art, did you?" He had printed a copy for himself and framed it. He planned to preserve it in his subspace pocket later.

After all, his long-time friends would enjoy seeing it one day.

Shiroe sputtered. "That's Serara! And Naotsugu!"

Indeed, it was. In the image, Serara turned away from the viewer, looking towards something offscreen with a gaze full of sadness and longing. The regal cloak she wore made her look older than she was, and she held an open book full of unreadable text.

By contrast, Naotsugu wore a high-quality version of a commoner Lander's gear. Scrolls were tucked under his left arm, and a sledgehammer rested on his right shoulder even though a plain sword was strapped at his waist. He smiled with his usual carefree attitude.

The background was something Nyanta did not recognize, and he doubted Shiroe had any more familiarity with the location if it owed its existence to those two. A great stone building, perhaps an academy or a university, stood wreathed in mist in the center of a village by a river.

Shiroe took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. "So, they're already on Theldesia. In a way, that is good news." Both Nyanta and Shiroe had worried a little when neither of them could be found on Earth. "On the the other hand…"

Nyanta forcibly kept his tone upbeat. "We will see them when we get there, if they are Awake. I'm sure it will be a good reunion, nya."

"Yes," Shiroe agreed with more reluctance, "I'm sure it will be interesting."

Both Serara and Naotsugu were kind, good-natured people, of course. They also had several decades in which their well-meaning tendencies would encourage them to meddle. The ripples might affect things in interesting ways, Shiroe thought, if they didn't accidentally crash the loop.

Theldesia had another eighty or so years before the third World Fraction.

Naotsugu stood at Serara's back during the funeral, giving her the comfort of his silent presence as she placed her hand over the freshly-filled grave. Grass and flowers carpeted the formerly bare soil, and a tree grew behind the pair of headstones.

Delia and Russo had died within days of each other.

Slowly, the rest of the funeral party dispersed, eventually leaving only Naomi and Russo with them. The Lander couple had gained some gray hairs of their own the past couple of years. Everyone got older - except Adventurers.

Serara, not being an adult, gained perhaps a year for every twelve. Naotsugu had not aged at all in the last two decades.

Both of them had attended some Lander funerals before: acquaintances, colleagues. Delia and Russo had been more like family. Watching people reach the end of their natural lifespan wasn't like living through the end of a loop at all.

Naotsugu eventually led Serara away by the arm, leaving Naomi to mourn her parents.

The day was balmy and pleasant, but Serara felt cold.

Serara held a hand up over her eyes as they walked. It did nothing to hide her tears or the sobs shaking her body. Her voice was muffled and unsteady when she spoke. "Naotsugu-sempai, why did they have to die?"

Naotsugu didn't know how to reply. "Serara-chan…"

Serara barreled on. "We have ways to turn people into Adventurers, don't we? Shiroe does it with contracts all the time. Why couldn't we…"

"We don't have the ingredients or the tools, Serara-chan. Not for so many people," he told her gently. "Shiroe - he's a scribe, and he's built up his stock. Us?" His laugh was self-deprecating. "You haven't had the time, and I never thought I'd need to."

Naotsugu kept on talking, trying to fill in the awful silence. Weakly, he tried to joke, "It's too bad we can't grow potions on trees. It'd be like the apples of eternal youth, yeah?"

Serara stopped walking and dropped his hand. "It would, wouldn't it."

The look on her face honestly scared Naotsugu. "Nuh-uh, Serara-chan, mad science is bad science."

"But I could-"

Naotsugu shook his head. "What? Crash the loop and lose everyone anyways? Start wars because some nations can't grow or trade for whatever you came up with? Mistakenly create an abomination because of an experimental trial gone wrong?"

Serara tried to match Naotsugu's stare, gulped, and looked away.

"Serara," he said gently, "it's okay to want to keep what you have. Just be sure that you don't lose who you are along the way. Can you promise me that?"

Serara stood still for a few more minutes, but then slowly inclined her head in agreement. She licked her lips nervously. "Sempai," she said haltingly, raising her eyes again, "I still want to try something. I… We have so much we can do. I can't do nothing. Please, watch me and stop me if I go too near the edge?"

Impulsively, he hugged her. "Of course, Serara-chan. I'm good at stuff like that." He managed an honest smile. "Nyanta would never forgive me if I didn't keep you safe."

Serara's eyes widened at the mention of Nyanta, and then she looked flustered. Naotsugu bet she was thinking something like, 'I don't want to do something to disappoint Nyanta-san!'

Naotsugu didn't know if her thing for Nyanta was just an extended kind of puppy love or not. He hoped it would keep her grounded in the meantime.

7.B

Serara spent only two weeks trying to create a plant that could be turned into a worldwide source of immortality before realizing that she did not have the skills or knowledge needed to do so. On the other hand, fantasy games often had a source of immortality. She devoted her time to investigating the other options.

She had plenty of help. The lessons she had held in Stonethrow had slowly but surely turned into an official school. The Skill Academy taught people of all ages, and it had the makings of several fantastic libraries. The town had become very prosperous indeed.

The first suggestion she received was something common to many settings. Phoenix feathers did work… but the phoenixes of Theldesia were either summons that left nothing behind, incredibly rare, or both incredibly rare and incredibly dangerous. She could not rely on them.

Sometimes there was a Fountain of Youth. Naotsugu had left to investigate a rumor told by Landers that lived in the Floridian peninsula. Even at his level, it would take some time to make his way through the swampy jungle that dominated the landscape there.

Serara focused on plant-based options. The obvious choices from Earth mythology had not worked out. Either the substance didn't exist, or the fruit would not grow in other conditions. She needed something that could be made widely available.

Instead, she followed her own set of rumors garnered from Landers out in the west of the continent. Inside a valley so hot it killed, they said, the fruit of eternal youth grew on a lone hill.

Standing at the valley entrance, Serara licked her dry lips nervously.

There was a hill, certainly. It just happened to be alive and a boss rated for a level 70 legion raid. The Adventurers milling around it appeared to be winning - not certainly, but likely.

When the battle ended, the boss would remain hidden from encounters for at least another three years in Theldesian time.

The lumbering hill turned as its was aggroed by a group of Adventurers on the field, allowing her to observe it more closely. Ape-like in its awakened state, it balanced heavily on its two larger forearms and its bent hind legs. Its other two forearms balanced a crude spear seemingly formed from a petrified tree. Metallic rings decorated the spear, granting the monster some sort of arcane power.

The status screen named it The Living Mountain. Stone formed its body, and veins of magma traced its skin and filled its eyes. Still, Serara thought she could see tiny plants prospering in the sheltered crannies of its body.

Serara frowned. The Adventurers' attacks were damaging the plants. And, as well, the Mountain wasn't very good at attacking, just

extraordinarily powerful. She… felt somewhat sorry for it.

She could not act like an Adventurer here, however much that carried the risk of disrupting the "game's" perception of her. Serara had to hope that all would be well.

Besides, every gamer knew that NPCs could do things because of The Plot Demanded It, right?

Serara drew a circle in the soil with her staff. Soil pulled upwards from the earth. Sand became blood; rock became bristly fur. From the elements, a Wild Boar formed. Serara vaulted onto his back and commanded him forward with a press of her knees and a flex of her magic.

The boar rushed through the Adventurers, easily dodging anyone in its way. It approached the Mountain and its dangerous reach.

Serara shifted her magic once more.

The boar veered to the left. He quickly circled away from the hands and towards the back, squeezing through the narrow area between the Mountain's legs and the valley's sides. Undoubtedly, the game interface prevented Adventurers from taking the same route.

The back was unguarded. A thick tail, like a lifeline, swept down into the ground. Serara urged the boar upwards.

She had him stop when he reached the boar's head. She dismounted and touched the living stone beneath her, not knowing if she could do anything but having to try.

Serara found herself with the full attention of the Mountain, its plants…

...and the rest of the land, right to the borders of the desert. The sheer pressure of everything pressing on her mind overwhelmed Serara.

Her vision faded.

Serara did not know whether she fainted or not, but when she next had coherent thoughts, she found herself sitting on top of an unnaturally shaped, sandy hill with a single small cactus inside a hardened clay pot on her lap.

Looking down from the top of the hill, Serara saw only the bodies of Adventurers standing steady and silent. If the battle had ended, it was necessary for the time perception of the Terran-side players to resync with Theldesian time after having battled in real time. The magic that connected the two worlds was amazing enough to adapt to that.

Serara rose unsteadily to her feet, feeling oddly like a rock herself, and carefully held the potted cactus against her stomach. It did not look like much, but the description on the status screen gave her hope. She read it aloud with a small smile.

"Century Cactus: The fruit of this plant is said to grant longevity and bestow life upon even the nonliving. However, it requires powerful magic to sprout and fruit."

Serara nodded determinedly to herself. She could work with that.

Serara looked between the steepness of the hill and the delicate pot in her arms a few times before making a face. Her boar grunted, agreeing with her assessment. She slipped the cactus into her inventory, not trusting her subspace pocket to keep it healthy, and climbed back on the boar.

"Thanks for getting me here, Boar-san. I trust you can get me down again?"

The boar snorted disdainfully and shot off with her clutched to its back. Serara knew that even falling off at this speed would not really hurt her. Nevertheless, going downwards at such a speed without a saddle...

Serara was still screaming when the boar ran past the frozen Adventurers and out of the valley.

The ring of boulders sat quiet and undisturbed in the midst of the forest. A well-used path led up to and away from them, but no feet trod upon it at the current hour.

Then, the boulders flared with light, motes dancing up towards the sky. Some of the light coalesced in the center of the stones before all of the light abruptly died. The figure left in the center removed her hand from her eyes, having preemptively protected her vision.

Serara covered a yawn. *Fairy Rings are a little disorienting,* she thought as she carefully stepped out of the ring and down the path. She then went off the path because she did not want any trouble. After she used a variation on Druidic plant magic, she became more-or-less invisible amongst the trees as she travelled alongside the route.

None of the silent avatars of Adventurers she passed so much as noticed Serara, which was the point. Being spotted outside towns could lead to some nasty situations. Serara did not know what the *Elder Tales* players thought of her and Naotsugu. but the players' behavior creeped Serara out.

Worse than the silent crowds were the ones who tried to kill them. Serara had already had to level herself up from 90 to 100 in order to protect herself. A 10-level gap between her and the level 80 Adventurers had not been enough.

Nevertheless, she refused to stay only in the Adventurer-free zones. Their Skill Academy at Stonethrow, despite having started as one, had become a destination for questing Adventurers. Also, she had tasks to complete elsewhere, as did Naotsugu.

As today was a day of rest at the Academy, Naotsugu's plans for the day had revolved around spending some alone time with his current

girlfriend. Serara had other plans.

That had led her here, the forest near Akiba.

She reached the edge of the forest. Her spell dissipated as she left the trees, but she slipped inside the city gates before any of the Adventurers had time to react. Inside the city, they crowded her as usual, but they could not harm her. She ignored the storm of chat requests she received, as always, and left the Adventurers to mill about pointlessly when she entered a building with specific permissions that forbid any other Adventurer.

Inside, it was a greenhouse. Row upon row of cacti stretched across the room. She knew even more were in the upper and basement floors, more than enough to supply every Lander in Eastlande with surplus left over.

The Century Cactus had turned out to be perfect for her needs, though they did require some effort to maintain. Able to grow in nearly any type of soil and with barely any moisture, they only needed to be kept in hot and sunny conditions - and magic lamps could take care of both requirements easily.

They would have spread like weeds except for two additional requirements. First, people needed to manually pollinate them and replant the seeds. Second, she had carefully bred a strain over five years so that they didn't grow without her magic.

Her first attempt had given the kingdom neighboring Stonethrow a strain that did not need her. That had led to trouble: political upheaval, assassination attempts… and the mess had only ended up settled after she destroyed all of those plants and Naotsugu organized a revolution to supplant the previous rulers.

Everything was fine now. Each Adventurer city kept their region's supply. She could take care of a server area in a day thanks to the inter-city gates, and she only needed to make the rounds twice a year to ensure the cacti sprouted and the fruit grew.

The fruit of the Century Cactus, labelled by the system as the Century Pear, wasn't a source of true immortality, but it certainly helped. Consuming the pears slowed aging by a significant factor and even restored the body to some degree. It could cure almost any disease.

More importantly, the skin of the fruit, properly prepared into a potion, created a extremely high-quality dye. If a sigilmancer used the spines of the cacti as needles to apply the dye, the sigilmancer could create a tattoo that allowed for a Lander to resurrect once per tattoo at an Adventurer cathedral.

Serara couldn't thank Naotsugu enough for all the work he had put into discovering that, along with everything else. He had been the one to come up with the method of distribution for the fruit as well.

Across the front line of the greenhouse, a line of five Landers bowed to her in greeting. Serara bowed back. "It's nice to see you, everyone!" she said cheerfully. "Erin-san, Caeler-san, I see you're doing well." They were her former students whom she had trained personally.

"We're glad to see you, Serara-sama!" Caeler responded, gesturing towards one of the far interior doors. He was an energetic man, not having let his age stop him from traveling to the Academy for further study only a decade ago. "Please, let me serve you some tea before you start."

Serara nodded. It was easier to work from a seated position. She walked with him side by side. "How have you been doing, Caeler-san? Your granddaughter wanted me to tell you that she misses you. She is a joy to teach."

Caeler chuckled, "It does this old man's heart good to hear that." He had to be over 90 by now despite looking like a healthy 70-year-old at worst, thanks to the Century Pear's effects.

Serara smiled as she pulled an envelope out from her magic bag. "She wrote you a letter, too."

"Ah, my thanks!"

They continued to chat while they made the long walk to the other end of the greenhouse. Serara could feel all of the plants and seeds waiting for her touch. She ignored them for the moment as she sat down for tea with Caeler.

She carefully listened to all he had to say as she sipped at the tea and nibbled on some well-made cookies. Caeler did more than manage the greenhouse; he kept her informed about any issues with getting the fruit out across his part of Yamato. Today, like most days when Caeler had nothing to report, he entertained her with local gossip instead.

"...So the widowed duchess decided that she didn't want to spend the next few decades alone after all... scandal to the whole court... family went into mining... The Kunie clan and the Order are working to..."

She kept one ear on the comforting stream of words while she filled the greenhouse with every bit of power she could spare. Caeler, noticing the sweat on her brow, kindly placed a tasteless but restorative MP potion next to her teacup.

Soon, both her task and the gossip wrapped up. Serara bid Caeler a fond farewell after he escorted her back out the front of the building. She would have liked to stay; however, the other Adventurer cities in Yamato needed her attention.

Alone again, Serara sighed as Adventurers once again crowded around her.

However, this time, one of the chat requests caught her eye.

Call from Nyanta. Accept? Y/N.

Serara froze. The picture was definitely Nyanta. Was he Awake? What should she do?

She took a deep breath.

Call accepted.

The friends menu pinpointed his location for her. She looked past some of the Adventurers around her to the emotionless mien of Nyanta's avatar and felt like crying.

However, she heard nothing but a staticy mess when she tried to converse with Nyanta. She doubted that the issue was solely one-way. It was yet another disappointment.

Serara fought past that and took the time to add Nyanta to her own friends list. He must have already done so in order to initiate the call. She wished she could do more to stay connected to him.

The call ended.

Then, she received a trade request. In it was a package of items: Cake-Print Mail x99, Fancy Black Ink x99, and a Fancy Steel-Nibbed Pen.

From what Serara knew, 'Mail' was an item made by scribes. She did not recall if it was around in her baseline, but its recipe had appeared in a recent patch. The item was meant for written player-to-player communication and was something of a magic item. A single other item could be attached to it, allowing for players to 'wrap' a gift and send it to another person.

She dug an apple out of her pocket and set it in her end of the trade. The trade was completed.

And then she received a Cat-Print Mail from Nyanta. It read, "I am glad I was finally able to catch up with you, Serara-chan." There was an attached item, a daisy.

Her vision blurred. She wiped her eyes against her sleeve.

And Serara smiled. She had Nyanta back.

Once back in the North American region, Serara hastily contacted Naotsugu.

"Naotsugu! I met Nyanta today!" she practically squealed as she rode a Magic Carpet from the nearest Adventurer city back to Stonethrow. "He friended me! We used Mail to chat!" She babbled on about everything she and Nyanta had talked about, too excited to let Naotsugu slip a word in.

When she finally paused for breath, Naotsugu laughed. "That was faster than I expected. Shiroe said that making the supplies for Nyanta would take longer."

It was a good thing Serara was not walking. She might have fallen. As it was, her mouth opened and closed soundlessly. An exclamation was strangled in her throat.

Finally, she wailed, "Why didn't you say something?"

"I thought it'd be a nice surprise. It's not the best, having to deal with using items and the time delay, but it's better than nothing, right?"

She made a sound of agreement. "It is." She sighed. "We will not be able to talk often if they are still in Japan," she noted.

Naotsugu chuckled mischieviously. "Ah? Nyanta didn't tell you? Shiroe said that they would be moving servers. They'll base themselves out of Dixie," he said, naming the Theldesian equivalent of a city named Charleston in the United States, "though Shiroe plans to travel to Portage and Labrador for higher-level quests."

Serara was pretty sure Portage was a city named Anchorage on Earth. Labrador - she wasn't sure of that. It was located on one of

the Canadian bays, she knew, and there were the ruins of an airport there. It was nearly always cold.

She would happily stay in Stonethrow. Honestly, seeing Nyanta's empty body walk around was creepy.

7.C

Nyanta looked over the last letter he had gotten from Serara and breathed out in relief.

Shiroe, who was gaming from the other computer in their shared but roomy apartment, turned his head at the sound. "What's up?"

Nyanta leaned back in his chair. "Serara found this loop's incarnation of Konyan over in Theldesia. There was a version of Wonderland hidden near the South Pole."

Shiroe shivered. "Sounds cold." But he smiled at Nyanta. "In any case, congratulations."

Nyanta had, admittedly, worried when he could not find Konyan as a domestic cat on Earth. Shiroe could see that Serara's find cheered Nyanta up immensely.

"If Wonderland is at the South Pole," Shiroe mused, "I wonder if, at the North Pole…"

Nyanta and Shiroe exchanged a glance. Nyanta's mouth twitched into a smile. "Perhaps she will look for Santa next summer, nya."

She had time, after all. There were 38 more summers before the Catastrophe.

Burying her face in her thick, pink scarf, Serara silently wished that Akatsuki was around to knee Naotsugu in the face. Naotsugu had said that exploring her preferences and going out on dates was a healthy thing for a physically-about-20 young woman to do, but it just had not worked out.

Joneth, a scholar, had been polite enough. He was not a handsome man, and he had a mature mindset. The dinner had gone smoothly. The food was good. The conversation kept her interested.

But when he walked her home and he kissed her hand in farewell, she had only felt relief and a strange kind of disappointment. There hadn't been any thrill. She did not blush and get flustered like she did when spending time with Nyanta. She had not wanted Joneth to kiss her again on her hand, and she certainly felt no urge to kiss him on the lips.

Serara collapsed backwards onto her bed and stared up at the canopy. She could not get herself interested in any kind of dallying with anyone at all. She only wanted Nyanta.

Since a recent letter from Nyanta had strongly implied that he still regarded her as a kid, that was definitely a problem, a tremendous, gigantic, distressing problem.

She felt something land on the bed and looked up into Konyan's eyes.

As was apparently normal behavior even though she was not looping, Konyan had long ago gotten into Naotsugu's potion supplies and managed to change her appearance to that of a young Werecat girl while retaining the purple fur of a Cheshire Cat. "Welcome home, Mama! How was your date?"

Serara groaned. She doubted Konyan would understand. Konyan was physically about 6 years old, technically about 20, and mentally somewhere between those ages depending on the subject. In

particular, Konyan still thought about romance and relationships at a child's level, perhaps because she had never gone through puberty.

"Ah. You really only like Nyanta-papa, don't you?" Konyan asked wisely.

Or Serara was wrong.

"Yes," Serara agreed. She sighed. "But he does not see me that way."

Konyan cuddled up next to her adoptive mother. She confided to Serara, "I thought Uncle Nao's idea was stupid. Cute men flirting with you makes you blush, but you only get all gooey-eyed around Nyanta-papa."

"Oh, really?"

"Everyone knows it," Konyan confirmed, "but Uncle doesn't get how much you like Nyanta-papa. He thinks it's more like… Remember how Mr. Liffisk got around you?"

Serara winced. She never liked dealing with students who crushed on her.

Konyan nodded. "Exactly." Then she yawned.

Serara smiled at her. "It's getting late, Nya-chan. We should get ready for bed."

"Mooooooom! Don't treat me like a kid!" Konyan pouted as she rolled off the bed. "I'm not a baby."

Serara rolled off the bed herself and crouched down to envelope Konyan in a hug. "It's something mothers do," she told her daughter.

Konyan made a protest. It was half-hearted and muffled by Serara's jacket. Still, Konyan allowed Serara to cajole her into readying for bed.

Later, Serara carefully tucked Konyan into her child-sized bed. Konyan usually kicked all of her covers off during the night and stretched out like a contented cat, but Konyan never could get to sleep properly unless she was practically wrapped in a blanket. Her current blanket, also her favorite, was a quilt that the two of them had made together.

Serara gently smoothed back Konyan's fur and kissed her forehead. "Have a good night, Nya-chan."

Konyan grumbled a little, but she did not try to wiggle away from the display of affection. Instead, she looked at her mother seriously and said, "Nyanta-papa won't be here for another twenty years, right?"

"Right," Serara replied calmly.

Serara had explained to Konyan about the loops and about why Serara had adopted her after Konyan had decided to start calling Serara 'Mama'. Konyan had taken in the explanation, thought about it for a few days, and continued to do what she wanted.

Such was normal behavior for a cat.

Konyan curled her fists into her quilt. Already half-asleep, she murmured, "I wish I could meet him in person before…"

Serara continued to gently stroke Konyan's head as the Werecat succumbed to sleep.

Serara swallowed against the lump in her throat. If her eyes shone, it could be blamed on the moonlight striking her eyes rather than any unshed tears.

Resting his head in his hand while leaning his elbow against the sturdy wooden picnic table, Naotsugu idly twitched the stick in his other hand. A string dangled from the other end, and a large,

gorgeous feather weighted with a little bag swished at the end of the string.

Sitting on the ground, Konyan followed the movements of the feather with her eyes. They swayed back and forth, back and forth.

Konyan's hand shot out. The feather danced out of her reach just before she could touch it.

Konyan withdrew her arm and returned to watching the feather as Naotsugu grinned. Her reactions were amusing enough for him to keep teasing her all day.

On the other side of the table, a Lander by the name of Lilah carefully dabbed lipstick on her mouth while she looked in a mirror. Some gossipmongers attributed her current position as head of the mathematics department to her sleeping with Naotsugu, but truthfully that had come after - Lilah had worked her way up from a housekeeper using her brain, not her body.

That, along with her curves and blonde hair, had attracted Naotsugu like iron to a magnet. Lilah made sure that he understood that she put her job before him, and he preferred that sort of commitment.

Lilah snapped her compact shut, the sound drawing Naotsugu's attention for a moment. Konyan took advantage to snatch the stick itself from Naotsugu's hand.

Konyan opened the bag and shook the contents out into her hand. It was a ring crafted out of a solid piece of the gemstone called tiger's eye, but it was very bulky and plain. Even the polishing had not been smoothly completed.

Konyan beamed at Naotsugu. "Thanks, Uncle!" Since she was well on her way to becoming a master jeweler, the ring suited her perfectly. She had plenty to do to refine it.

Naotsugu laughed, a little rueful. "You're welcome, Nya-chan. Good job on catching it."

Konyan's smile grew wider. She looked at Lilah and winked. "Thanks, Ms. Lilah!"

Lilah winked back. "You're welcome, Nya-chan," she replied quite smugly. "Why don't you go start working on that?"

Konyan agreed happily and ran off.

The gears turned in Naotsugu's mind. Groaning, he threw his head back against the table and complained, "Teaming up on me just isn't fair."

"Team ups are entirely fair," Lilah refuted in an all-too-innocent tone while looking at Naotsugu meaningfully.

"...Huh. Really?"

"Really."

It seemed like Naotsugu had something nice coming his way.

And so life continued at its slow but enjoyable pace for Serara and Naotsugu until the news finally came from Shiroe.

Atharva had officially confirmed the release date of the *Homesteading the Noosphere* expansion as midnight JST on May 3. Shiroe and Nyanta had six months; Serara had Naotsugu had six years.

All had preparations to make.

Shiroe and Nyanta went online and planted rumors that a special event would take place at that time for anyone logged in to *Elder Tales* . Interestingly, official statements from Atharva did not deny it and even seemed to hint that the rumors were true.

Serara and Naotsugu dove into working on infrastructure to manage the Adventurers that were sure to arrive. Discreetly, using the network of contacts and friends built up by their work, they provided warnings about the upcoming change to the populace. The Lander governments only informed if Naotsugu judged them as good-willed enough to not try and take advantage of the information to the detriment of the Adventurers or other Landers.

The thirteen orders of knights needed more explicit warnings. Serara invited the leaders of each order to Stonethrow Academy for a conference.

Serara had decided to design the conference room much like that of the Round Table Alliance with a few changes. Instead of a solid round table, there were four tables that formed a circle but allowed for speakers to enter into the empty section in the center. For the purposes of this conference, Serara had hung a magic-powered 3D map of Theldesia from the ceiling, high enough where no one's view of the others would be obstructed.

But Naotsugu would lead the conference itself, it being his idea.

Serara rose from her chair next to Naotsugu. "Thank you all for coming. I would like to welcome you all to Stonethrow. This conference will be lead by my colleague, Naotsugu, as he has more experience in areas relevant to the issues at hand. In the event that this conference lasts longer than a day, rooms are available for you and your retinues."

She sat, and Naotsugu stood. He cleared his throat. "All right. So, here's the deal. On May 4th, six years from now, the souls of the Adventurers will be transferred into their bodies."

Some people began muttering at that information, and one or two tried to speak. Naotsugu raised his hand and gestured for quiet.

"That is the least of it. It is highly likely that, either during this event or shortly afterwards, a new kind of monster will appear. These

monsters, called the Genius, are as strong - no, stronger - than any single Adventurer or Ancient. Some are stronger than a party. Some, perhaps, might need to be faced by a full raid.

"And the Genius will be coming to kill or capture all of the Ancients in Theldesia. You all would be an impediment in their plans to seize control of all Theldesia."

One of the Jade Knights, the knights of the Chinese server region, scoffed. "What proof do you have? Do you really expect us to believe in this madness? Adventurers having souls would be bad enough, but our orders could handle any monster to attack us."

"That would be true," Naotsugu replied with a raised eyebrow, "if the Genius cared about petty things such as safe zones and the rules of the system. They can get around them because they know something you do not."

The knight demanded to know, "What?"

Naotsugu solemnly replied, "You view the Adventurers as nothing more than soulless golems, little better than monsters themselves, who are not truly people. However, this is incorrect. Their bodies are soulless, true, but only because their souls are in their real bodies."

He gestured at the 3D display, and it began to change. Slowly, it zoomed out from the surface of Theldesia until a globe with a moon hung in the air. Then, a much larger globe and moon came into view by its side.

"In another dimension, on a planet called Earth, magic does not exist. There are no levels, no classes, no system-granted skills. There are no true monsters, as well as no demihumans. Elves, dwarves, and alvs do not, and have never, existed. There are only humans, and they are numerous."

The display began to zoom in on Earth. Slowly, the city of Tokyo was brought into view.

"Without magic, they have advanced their technology. They use science to do many of the things we could not do without magic or magical ingredients. Horseless vehicles that run thanks to internal combustion engines. Stoves that heat without burning fuel. Screens that can display images from half the world away. And, of course, games that utilize that technology."

The display went into a busy internet cafe, showing screens where people watched videos, wrote on forums and social media sites, and engaged in playing a variety of different games. Then it focused on a single boy's screen as he loaded a certain game.

The knights uniformly gained visages of frozen horror.

"You see, from their point of view, our world is the game. To them, none of this is real. We are the puppets, filling a role that only exists to make the game more interesting. We are little better than dolls."

The knights did look like puppets with their strings cut. Someone moaned as if in pain.

Shiroe had warned Naotsugu and Serara about how the Genius had mowed down their opposition so easily in the baseline. Seemingly, discovering these facts did something to Landers that disabled them. That was why the conference was necessary. The knights needed to be immunized against the disease, so to speak.

Naotsugu slammed a gauntleted fist into the table. "Don't be stupid!"

Dazed eyes tracked his movements.

"The Adventurers' world is real, but so is ours! We are not puppets! We are real people, with real souls, living real lives. The Genius know this, but they will twist their words to drive you into despair. If you are like this, how many of you would be able to resist them?"

The next table over, a knight stood slowly, shakily. Naotsugu noted his identity as Elias Hackblade, the 'hero' of *Elder Tales* . "How do

you know all of this?" Elias asked with a quavering voice.

Naotsugu snorted. "C'mon. I know people have been speculating about me and Serara for years. Where did we come from? Who are we really?

"The truth is, both me and Serara are Adventurers, and we know all of this because we were sent back in time."

The conference somewhat… exploded. Thankfully, Naotsugu thought, that was figuratively.

At least the knights weren't acting like kicked puppies anymore. This, Naotsugu could use.

The day of the Third World Fraction, hundreds of thousands of Adventurers appeared worldwide in the Adventurer cities. Every city had a group of Landers and Ancients working together to keep the cities calm.

The Ancients would be taking advantage of the power of the Adventurers to survive the Genius soon enough.

Meanwhile, Serara waited in Big Apple. All three were dressed in Adventurer gear. Big Apple had a habit of falling into chaos over the loops. Besides food riots, sometimes the Adventurers wrecked the Cathedral and made resurrection impossible. Serara and Naotsugu aimed to prevent that this time around.

Knights from the Wenkeeper order were dispersed throughout the city in case they were needed. However, Serara knew that the Adventurers would need at least a few hours to absorb the thought that they were actually in Theldesia before they worked on the next step: NPCs were real people.

At the predicted time, the city filled with the light of teleportation. Dazed Adventurers were left in its wake, looking at the ground and

the sky as if they were just born.

There were some exceptions. Much like Soujirou did in Akiba, some grew excited at being in Theldesia and wanted to go out and 'play' for real. But the rest…

Serara saw a child, no more than thirteen, start to cry for his parents. The mood began to spread and affect other nearby Adventurers. Serara walked over and pulled out a handkerchief.

"There, there," she comforted him with an arm around his shoulders as he wiped at his face. "Your parents aren't here, but you are not alone. I will make sure of that."

The boy tried to hold back his sniffles. He failed.

"It's okay to cry," Serara said. "But here. Why don't you drink some water? You might feel better afterwards."

The boy accepted the canteen from her and gulped some water down. He also dumped some on his head, but when nothing happened - it had likely been an attempt to wake up from a dream - the boy's face began to crumple again.

However, that stopped when he looked at Serara. "You're the lady from the box art!" he yelped in surprise. "But… but… you're just an NPC!"

Faces began to turn their way. "Holy crap, the kid's right," someone exclaimed.

"Hey, isn't that Naotsugu?"

"The wanderers…"

Agitation again spread through the crowd. Naotsugu put Konyan up on his shoulders. Then, he slapped his hands together, making a loud, ringing clang that left silence in its wake as everyone's attention turned to him.

He spoke authoritatively. "Guys, get a hold of yourselves. Riots are bad for everyone. Obviously, neither I nor Serara are NPCs. If you've got any questions, ask away."

The crowd still looked uneasy, but someone stepped forward. Upon seeing the copious amount of green, Naotsugu realized that it was Leonardo, the Ninja Turtle cosplayer who usually ended up skipping continents and swept up in the wake of Typhoon Kanami.

Leonardo asked, "Yeah, I have a question. What the hell happened? Why are we here? Is this real?"

Naotsugu nodded. "Yes, this is all real. You might think of us as 'NPCs', but we are real people and always have been. Serara and I were 'wanderers' because we ignored rules and traditions. Most of the people who interacted with you guys were just filling a role like an actor would.

"As for why some magic, the Third World Fraction, brought you here, who knows? It wasn't anything anyone Adventurer or Lander did. Maybe the world needs you, or maybe our two worlds got too closely connected." Naotsugu shrugged. "I wish I could help more. I really do."

Still comforting the boy, Serara turned slightly to interject, "We will do what we can, of course."

"Right," Naotsugu agreed. He put his hands on his hips and surveyed the crowd. "There's a lot of things you need to know. Serara's a pretty good teacher, so she can put together a lecture for you all by…" He looked at Serara questioningly, though they had already planned this beforehand.

The catastrophe happened at midnight JST on Earth. That was actually sunrise on May 4 in Theldesia's Japan. On the other side of the world, they had an hour until sunset.

So she replied, "Sunset."

"Right. In about an hour, Serara can teach you all about life in Theldesia. We'll hold it at, eh, the old sports stadium. It should hold everyone. We'll do our best to answer more questions then. In the meantime, be sure to spread word, right? There's a lot more to living well than using a menu."

The crowd didn't look happy. They grumbled. But, they were reassured enough that they started talking to each other and calming down as Serara and Naotsugu moved through the crowd. After a moment, the boy and others followed.

7.D

Labrador had an unusually seasonal population for an Adventurer town, at least for this loop. While popular for about three months a year thanks to a deluge of Christmas- and snow-themed events, at other times most Adventurers used it only as a temporary staging and supply point while undertaking high-level quests and raids. Even the quests mostly began in other towns.

Large guilds had generally avoided making Labrador their permanent base of operations despite the high-level monsters and dungeons nearby. Outside the guild center, expansive buildings had a much higher than average rate of being "randomly afflicted" (from a player's point of view) by weather-induced destruction or related costs. An enchanted glacier that flowed from a nearby dungeon did nothing to help the local climate. Settling in Portage, despite its higher latitude, or somewhere southerly made more sense.

Of course, both of those factors did encourage the smaller high-level guilds, particularly production guilds, to settle in Labrador. The smaller buildings were relatively cheap, and transients would happily spend their money on top-tier Production-class items.

Now, the 3,000 or so Adventurers in Labrador shivered in the cold night air, listless and depressed.

Nyanta thought it was a shame that the Catastrophe had to happen and rip people away from their homes; nevertheless, he had supported Shiroe's plan to encourage more Adventurers worldwide to be online. The Genius Monsters often had a too-easy time ravaging areas outside of Japan thanks to their scattered opposition.

Why Nyanta was in Labrador, rather than Big Apple with his daughter and long-separated friends, was the concern that Labrador could not sustain itself in the current situation. More than most cities, Labrador had relied upon the trade fostered by the inter-city gates to survive. Most nearby monsters did not have a high drop rate for food ingredients, and the growing season was short.

The bounty of the sea could offset some of the difficulties, perhaps.

What Labrador did have to its benefit was one specific guild. The Surf+Sea Dogs was the only large guild in the city at approximately 1100 members. They survived because they had managed to purchase the only sheltered large building available to guilds, nestled against the city walls by the docks.

A high portion of their guild members were sailors, fishermen, and buccaneers (a subclass that was called 'pirate' most other servers). They needed dock access for their fleet of ships.

For shipowners, Labrador was a prime location. The regions equivalent to Greenland and Iceland were rich in dungeons and required either ships, an inconvenient series of Fairy Rings, or a long and tricky trek across sea ice to access. The ocean zones had their own rare monsters and dungeons as well. On top of all that, Labrador had extensive docks sheltered by some of the many small islands that dotted the coastline.

So, even with the Catastrophe having happened only yesterday evening, Nyanta had business to conduct on board the *Merry Titania* in the morning. Having reached through a contact in the guild to arrange a meeting, he found the Surf+Sea Dogs' leader waiting for him when he reached the top of the gangplank.

Nyanta made an elegant bow. "Permission to come aboard, meow?"

The leader, Redcurls, made a disgusted sound. "Oh God, you're still talking like that?" she asked reflexively, then flushed a little. She did have a reputation for what some called 'foot-in-mouth disease' and others called 'not having a filter'.

Nyanta cleared his throat. "Considering I am now a cat, is it not even more appropriate?"

Redcurls crossed her arms stubbornly. Every inch of her wore top-quality gear for Pirate-class players in a winter environment. She had enjoyed playing up the stereotype in-game; now that it was real, she had dropped the pirate speech. With a sigh, she said, "Yeah, whatever, permission granted. What do you want?"

Nyanta stepped lightly onto the fine wooden deck of the ship. The *Merry Titania* was colored a curious shade of green, and her sails were deceptively delicate and semi-transparent lengths of gauzy white cloth. It had oars down below.

Its flashy looks suited Redcurls.

Nyanta said to Redcurls, "I wanted to ask you and the *Merry Titania* to help me gather some rare materials. It is a mission necessary for the survival of Labrador."

Redcurls narrowed her eyes. "Explain."

"Yes, please do," a feminine voice said from near Nyanta's ear.

He looked but saw nothing. With a light shrug, he replied, "I believe I can reopen the inter-city gate. Without trade, our supplies of food will not last."

The look Redcurls sent him was anything but promising.

Nyanta said, "We need the Eyes of Jorgumandr." The Maw of the World Snake dungeon, located off the coast of Iceland, was one of

the most difficult to defeat in North America. It was not, however, one of the lengthiest, as it only had one boss - Jorgumandr himself.

The voice near his ear gasped in delight. "Oh, do let us go, Captain! I remember having such fun the last time."

Redcurls, also hearing the voice near her own ear, grimaced, then shot Nyanta an exasperated glare. "We can't go. Who knows if the Cathedrals even work anymore? I won't risk dying, Nyanta."

"Caaaaptaaaainnn," the voice whined miserably.

"We will resurrect if killed," Nyanta responded. "A friend of mine in South Angels told me."

The voice whined at Redcurls again.

Redcurls pouted. "Argh, fine. Titania!" she commanded, "Inform the crew. If we're gonna be stuck here in fantasyland, why not be big damn heroes while we're at it." She pointed threateningly at Nyanta. "And if you're pulling my leg, Nyanta, I'll make sure you regret it."

Nyanta cocked his head, then blinked. "The ship can talk," he realized.

The Dogs' fleet had two Phantasmal-class ships that easily sailed against the wind and current. However, unlike the *Dark Manta* , the *Merry Titania* 's figurehead had possessed an "AI" - in other words, it had sapience in the reality of Theldesia.

"Correct," the voice chirped. "I am Titania. It is a pleasure to meet you."

Redcurls grumbled, "Noisy."

The voice, sounding only amused, replied, "Rude."

Nyanta only smiled, happy that they had agreed to the raid.

Jorgumandr's Eyes would make opening the gates easier, that was certain. Shiroe could brute-force his way through the magic regulating them if needed. However, both Shiroe and Nyanta himself preferred to take a less strenuous and risky way - especially if the easier way had extra benefits.

A guild seen taking action would calm the rest of the Adventurers in Labrador down some. With luck, they would decide to either stay put or explore Theldesia themselves instead of falling into a vicious cycle of PKing. Compared to the Japanese players, American Adventurers included a higher percentage of PK specialists.

Among the Dogs' best fighters were several PK tournament champions and fans, including a couple of potential troublemakers. Getting them out of the city was best for everyone.

Nyanta and Redcurls stood on the prow of the *Titania* and gazed at the setup for Jorgumandr's zone through telescopes. The Catastrophe had not changed it.

The Maw of the World Serpent was a legion raid dungeon. Therefore, their fleet had twelve ships, each manned by a party of six. The path to Jorgumandr began with passage through two huge, eternal icebergs and followed a trail through dangerous waters; rocks lined the route and were occasionally hidden underwater.

Waves of monsters had attacked them, but practice en route and careful planning let them defeat the enemies with ease. Now, at Redcurls' order, the ships spread out in a circle.

Twelve of the ships docked at eight small islands, each with an altar upon it. The other eight ships, including the *Titania* and the *Manta* , stationed themselves between the islands. The setup was necessary to awaken Jorgumandr.

Through Telepathy's party chat function, Redcurls said, "Ships are in position. Are the ground crews ready, Shanks?"

"Aye, ground crews ready," replied ShankYouVeryMuch, a Summoner who had been one of the PKers Shiroe had worried about. It turned out that he was rather polite and kind outside of battle, not inclined to needless violence when a game became reality. He was also much better at strategy and tactics in the real world of Theldesia than he had ever been in the game.

Redcurls acknowledge Shanks' response. "Alright! Ground crews, activate the altars in 3, 2, 1, now!"

The altars lit up in beautiful rainbow glows. Then, an abyss opened up in the center of the circle. A giant, scaled head pushed up out of the water, sea mist showering down the viper-like lines of its body. It pushed farther and farther into the air until even the ships were dwarfed by the massive sea serpent.

Jorgumandr cast his head about and looked over the Adventurers. Four eyes like starfields stared out of each side, and poison dripped from its bared fangs into the water.

Unexpectedly, its tail rose out of the water to join the head. The tail had four eyes of its own – no mouth, but the eyes vigilantly tracked the parties.

"It is not following its old patterns," Redcurls stated calmly, even though none of the other enemies they had fought had done anything significant to break their in-game behavior. "It is already presenting its tail. 9 to 16, focus on the rear." Privately, to Nyanta, she asked, "What's your theory, old man?"

"Many bosses had higher-quality AI in *Elder Tales* , did they not, meow?" he stated just as calmly. "It might be best to regard the Catastrophe as only the most obvious sign of changes to this world. In a world unrestricted, why would a being not be able to choose a different path?"

Redcurls swore once, then started barking more specific orders at Shanks and then at the ships. "It's not following the pattern, so

neither are we! Keep an eye out for its signature moves. In the meantime, break out the new tech. Load it out and light it up!"

As the ground crews attacked with magic and projectiles, taunting Jorgumandr into the reach of close-range fighters, the ships kept the World Snake distracted. Using the crude cannons that only ships could carry, the crews launched some rather potent munitions that did more damage than expected.

The crews, bored and stuck on the boats for days on end, had rather enjoyed discovering what they could craft outside the menu. At least a couple had a downright frightening amount of knowledge as to how to make things explode, and a sigilmaker Sorcerer had worked out how to stamp magic into all of it.

If they had not done so, Nyanta would later realize, Jorgumandr may have very well wiped out their raid. Jorgumandr did its best to turn the normal tactics against them. However, the special munitions confused it and shredded its plans.

Jorgumandr roared with fury. Its roar summoned its minions, large sea serpents that swept through the water towards most of the islands and boats. Wave after wave came, with the islands and ships not being attacked concentrating on healing themselves and attacking Jorgumandr. If they took too long to defeat it, the World Snake would retreat and not resurface for a year.

The tail swung at the *Titania* . Taking advantage of a lull in the cannonfire, Nyanta leapt upwards. He slashed at the eyes quickly and cleanly. When he landed back on the deck with a flourish, three meaty thumps that followed signaled the amount of his success.

Redcurls huffed in disbelief even as she unleashed a taunt that drew the tail's focus to her. "You crazy bastard. Did you just take out three of the eyes?" Her next skill parried the tail's strike, decreasing the damage she received to almost nothing.

"Meow. How disappointing," Nyanta commented as he backed her up with additional attacks. "I was going for all four."

When the tail next moved close, Redcurls' sword flashed out. A fourth lump of meat hit the deck. "Well, there you go," she said cheerfully even as renewed cannonfire blasted away at the tail. Even blinded, it continued to attack. "Four eyes down. Want to go for the rest?"

"Of course, meow."

Unheard by any of the fighters, Titania grumbled about the disgusting feel of raw meat on her wood. Her captain could be so unladylike sometimes. That was what she was thinking as she ensured the next cannon aimed directly at one of the gouges they had left behind.

As Serara and the crowd of Big Apple residents watched, the arch of the inter-city transport gate began to glow. The glow gained intensity quickly. The gate hummed with the amount of magical energy coursing through its stone.

Konyan clutched at Serara's hand with wide eyes. It certainly was impressive.

Serara felt a surge in the magic. "Everyone, close your eyes!" she ordered as she did so herself. The glow grew so bright that she could see it even so.

Then it was done. When she opened her eyes, blinking against the lingering spots, Serara saw Nyanta standing alone in the middle of the gate. Soon, other lights flashed around him as more people from Labrador and other cities came to Big Apple.

Nyanta bowed. "I am pleased to announce that the UN-Wen inter-city transport gates are now fully operational. Enjoy."

A cheer went up among the Adventurers, and many made for the gate to reunite with friends and guildmates.

Nyanta smiled and slipped through the crowd, making his way to Serara and Konyan. Seeing them standing together, he found himself only able to say one thing. "I'm home."

Serara might have been crying as she replied, "Welcome back."

Shiroe and Naotsugu sat in a casual, cheerful café in Susukino. Like many of the more successful Lander businesses, it had ties to Serara's unofficial network of former students - the owner was one herself, and she had partnered up with an Adventurer to branch out into Japanese-style food.

The café made great tea and fantastic sweets. Shiroe bit into his red bean bun with pleasure.

"Gotta say, Shiroe," Naotsugu mumbled through a mouthful of dango, "Serara surprised the crap out of me. She's always had enough guts to stick around with our group, but she really stepped up to the plate this time."

Shiroe ontinued to chew, then washed the mouthful down with tea. "We all have different strengths. You are good at befriending people. I am better at manipulating. Serara… She is good at being kind. It's not something that always works out."

Stretching, Naotsugu relaxed into his tastefully upholstered chair. "Neither does your way," he pointed out dryly, referring to how Shiroe's baseline actions made it very difficult for the average Adventurer in Akiba to trust the 'scoundrel in glasses'. While theoretically part of Shiroe's plan, Naotsugu thought that Shiroe hadn't accounted for all of the downsides.

Shiroe conceded the point with a bob of his head. "Yes, well. We all learn from our mistakes."

"Yeah." Naotsugu gulped down another bite of dango. "We've got time, don't we. Speaking of which, nice job with the gates. I didn't expect the international travel."

Shiroe smiled at that, smug for good reason. The spellwork for it had been beyond finicky, but Jorgumandr's Eyes and other raid loot had given him the key to solving the issue without accidentally blowing anyone up. Modestly, he said, "I couldn't have done it without Nyanta."

Naotsugu laughed. "That's one cat who takes to water! I met up with him in Labrador, and lemme tell you, I wasn't sure that ship would let him off. She was crushing harder than Serara. Er, the non-Awake one, that is."

Shiroe raised his eyebrows. "I did not think she had overcome it," he commented mildly as he sipped at his tea.

"Well, no," Naotsugu admitted with a shrug, "but you can't call it a crush at this point. It's not something small, and it's not something she can't control." He shrugged again. "Between this past century and loops without Nyanta, she needed to get a sense of self-worth that didn't depend on anyone else."

"It shows," Shiroe agreed. He fiddled with a piece of his bun's crust. "I hope she is up to making the first move. Nyanta has always been content in bachelordom."

Naotsugu grinned into sweet. "Ah, but you are discounting the influence of Konyan."

"Huh?"

"The brat ships her parents, yeah? If Serara doesn't do something or Nyanta keeps on playing clueless, Konyan might meddle to get what she wants." He slurped the rest of his tea and let out a satisfied sigh. "Konyan is a cat, you know."

"Hmm." Shiroe's face did not indicate his thoughts as he finished his own tea. Whatever the situation between Nyanta and Serara, he did not think anyone else's interference would have a good effect.

Up above the eastern coastline of what would have been Spain on Earth, an island floated in the sky. Despite the island having its own saltwater sea, only enough seawater to create a light, cloudy mist spilled over the edges. Rainbows frequently shimmered into being and vanished just as swiftly during both day and night.

In the game, no one could reach Neverland; its content had never been fully implemented off of the test server. In the real Theldesia, Serara had convinced Nyanta to go with her as a bit of a vacation.

Konyan had, perhaps smiling a bit slyly at the time, encouraged both of them to go without her, saying that she had to help Lilah - Naotsugu's ex-girlfriend, now the head of the academy - with the branch of the Stonethrow Skill Academy that had newly opened in Kartago. As one of the Adventurer cities on the African continent, it was sparsely populated and could easily adapt to an influx of both Adventurers and Landers using the gates to emigrate.

Watching the sun set in the distance, Nyanta and Serara sat side by side on a rocky cliff overlooking the Mermaids' Lagoon. It did, in fact, have several mermaids in it. They occasionally surfaced to stare and whisper at the Adventurers. The status screen noted them as Landers rather than monsters. Serara thought she should go make contact with them, maybe.

That could wait for later. Right now, Serara only cared about sitting there with her side pressed against Nyanta. Their seat was too small to sit further apart.

Serara did not mind at all. She hoped Nyanta liked it, too.

She clenched a fist as she mentally gathered her courage. It was now or never.

"Nyanta-san," Serara said in a voice that only quavered a little, "I want you to know that I… that I love you. Romantically, I mean."

She kept her eyes straight ahead. She could feel him looking at her, but she knew she would lose her nerve if she met his eyes.

"I know you don't feel the same way," she rushed to say. "That's fine! You are my best friend, and I am happy with that. I just, I just wanted to say it. I won't be weird about it, I promise."

It was already getting weird, wasn't it? Serara realized that glumly, but her mouth kept babbling. "Um, so, so, please keep being my friend. I won't-"

Serara felt Nyanta reach for her hand and squeeze it. Her jaw clamped shut. She gulped, nervous, even as she felt a little thrill from the contact. She mostly ignored the last; she often felt that way around Nyanta. However, she could not stop herself from blushing a little.

"Serara, I understand your feelings. I am not yet sure if I can respond to them in kind, but I would like to spend more time with you." Though he had been speaking solemnly, his voice took on a more playful tone as he observed, "Not that we do not already spend much of our time together, nya."

It was true, after all. Even in a normal loop, whether they were both Awake or not, they often went out to eat together; even more frequently, Serara would visit Log Horizon's home to help Nyanta cook or clean his room. Nyanta could easily handle both tasks without her, but he humored her despite that.

Serara laughed a little. If it came out somewhat awkwardly, they both ignored it. "Is that what they call 'platonic dating'?"

"If it is, it should not be too hard to change that into 'romantic dating', nya." He squeezed her hand again. "I'm willing to try."

Serara finally met his eyes. She had to smile. "I think this is a good start." She rested her head on his shoulder and gazed over the lagoon. It beautifully reflected the lush purple-red of the sky.

Shiroe had told them, "Our Loop now goes past New Year's Day. Expect the end to be on January 6 - that's the twelfth day of Christmas, if you want to see it that way."

Nyanta thought it an excellent excuse for a family celebration.

Shiroe himself had departed with Naotsugu a few days earlier. They planned to assail the raid bosses guarding one of the gold fountains to stock up on both rare drops and currency. The two were not with a group; they had pushed their levels up as soon as they reached the dungeon.

Dressed rather casually in warm flannel pajamas and a dark blue robe, he carefully removed the four small waffles from the waffle iron and put them onto a waiting stack. As the plate's enchantments kept food warm, Nyanta planned to finished enough waffles for everyone before breakfast began.

He tapped the spatula against the side of the mixing bowl thoughtfully. "Hmm, that should be enough of the chocolate, nya. Onto something else." He poured fresh batter into the bowl, added a generous scoop of canned blueberries, and whisked the new mixture together.

About ten minutes, Konyan made her way to the kitchen clad in her own fluffy, warm pajamas. Nyanta vaguely observed that they were not a pair she liked very much, as Konyan preferred anything not pink and did not see the appeal of Hello Kitty. It did, however, make for an adorable image when she wore them.

Konyan murmured, "Smells... good," managing to sound like a zombie in her half-awake state. She sat herself at the table.

Nyanta shifted the plate away from her. "Please wait for your mother," he requested. "She had trouble sleeping, but she should be down soon."

"Uuu," Konyan moaned in disappointment. Too sleepy to argue, she rested her head down on her arms. Within seconds, Nyanta heard small snores begin to emanate from her direction.

Nyanta laughed softly and continued to cook some side dishes - quietly, so as not to wake her.

A few minutes later, Serara entered the kitchen, wearing pajamas and a robe like Nyanta. She had come from her own bedroom, of course; their relationship had not changed to that extent yet.

When Serara opened her mouth to greet Nyanta, he put a finger over his mouth and gestured at Konyan with his other hand. Serara's eyes widened, then softened. She nodded in understanding.

While Nyanta finished cooking, Serara took out a camera to record the moment.

Serara silently pulled out a chair and sat down next to Konyan. There were only three places set. Aside from Shiroe and Naotsugu, the rest of Log Horizon (Shiroe having skillfully manipulated the guild into being) had gone on vacation to The Crossing, the Adventurer city at the eastern side of the Panama Canal.

Serara smiled fondly at her daughter. This was a nice enough way to end the loop.

Konyan pushed around the remains of her food around her plate. She didn't see how they could stand it, having everyone forget time spent together over and over and over again. She could not be so calm about it. In only a few hours, she herself would forget them.

One day, she might loop. Maybe. Until then…

If it was the Twelfth Day of Christmas, it wasn't too late to give them a present. She hopped down off her padded seat and looked at her parents. "Mama, Papa, will you come with me to my room?"

They exchanged curious glances, but they did follow her. She found herself bouncing a little, a mix of nerves and happiness, as she reached her door and pushed it open.

Insider, her room was full of neatly-packed, labelled boxes. Some had her jewelry crafting equipment in them; others had toys, books, and other miscellania that she thought important, even her favorite clothes. One box held nothing but journals, kept daily over the past two dozen or so years.

Konyan turned to face Serara and Nyanta. She looked up at them, her face set defiantly and her hands gripped together behind her back.

"Konyan…?" Serara asked hesitantly. "Why is everything packed up?"

Behind her back, Konyan's right hand fiddled with a bracelet on her left. She had crafted the deceptively delicate chains herself and made several of the charms. Her uncle Naotsugu had developed a special coating for them, and her uncle Shiroe had placed minute inscriptions on the charms and on the chain itself.

Konyan bluntly said, "I want you to take these and hold on to them until there's a me who's Awake." She turned slightly and looked behind her. "This is stuff that I like, so it's stuff that the other Konyan will like, if she's like me. I want myself to have it, later. And when she does, she can learn about the time she can't remember, when she was me."

Konyan was tearing up. That was okay. So were her parents. They knelt down, and she threw herself into their hug.

"We will take it with us and think of you always," Nyanta promised as he and Serara held Konyan tightly. "Even if you cannot remember it, your life here will not be forgotten."

She half-sobbed her thanks into his shoulder. Eventually, she reluctantly pulled away, just a step back, and undid the clasp on her bracelet. She held it out to her parents.

"There's this, too," Konyan said.

Her parents stared at it a moment, their eyes flicking as they read the status screen's description. "Oh, my," Serara said breathlessly.

It was called 'Konyan's Memory Charms', a level 30 item. Crafted by Konyan as a gift for her parents, each charm held an imprint of a precious memory. Any incarnation that wore it could choose to view the memories in the charms as if they were dreams.

Konyan had crafted and destroyed many bracelets before one's flavor text finally met her standards, as well as Shiroe's. Anything too weak would not have preserved the memories. Anything too strong could have hurt herself.

"Uncle Shiroe says this works like something called a 'Pensieve'. It's safe. But... wait until she's older for this and my journals? Even if she's me, I want her to be her own person first."

Nyanta reached out carefully and took the bracelet from her hand, and then it vanished into his subspace pocket. "We will. Thank you," he said, his voice rough with emotion. "Serara-chan, do you have enough space for Konyan's packages?"

Serara nodded and moved forward. "I've had a century to practice." She stopped to kiss Konyan's forehead before moving into the room.

"Be sure to keep that with you, Papa," Konyan told Nyanta with a wavering smile.

Nyanta put his hand on her head and rubbed her fur gently. "Always, my dear. Always."

Chapter Notes

7: Some families you are born to. Some you are chosen by. And some you stumble into accidentally, like Serara did by not-marrying into it. Progress of the Nyanta-Serara relationship: undefined.

Chapter 8

AN: Second chapter for today. A little late, but Merry Christmas!

8.1 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

Naotsugu

7:00 AM - Naotsugu stares on in confusion as a masked Shiroe races through the forest in a ninja garb towards the edge of town. He shrugs and continues his stretches.

7:30 AM - Guild eats breakfast together. Naotsugu sees Shiroe present with Enchanter equipment.

8:00 AM - Naotsugu and Shoryu training in level 70-80 fields to get used to higher level combatants. Arrives just in time for a swashbuckler with blue hair departing into the undergrowth after slaying an Omukade, a giant centipede creature.

10:00 AM - Naotsugu receives call from Soujiro, who just saw Shiroe enter a raid boss area, wearing a full suit of armor and wielding a battle ax.

10:05 AM - Naotsugu calls Shiroe, demands explanation, which Shiroe claims to not know what's going on.

10:10 AM - Naotsugu forms a party to investigate the multiple Shiroes.

10:30 AM - Party arrives at Heart of Akiba, consists of Naotsugu, Shoryu, Enchanter Shiroe, Michitaka, Soujiro, Krusty and Maryelle. Start comparing schedules.

Michitaka

9:00 AM - Meeting with craft item supplier when Druid Shiroe arrives, carrying Dragon blood ink and offering to sell it for marginal prices. After paying Shiroe, Druid disappears like a ghost.

Maryelle

9:30 AM - Wandering the guild hall when she comes across a female summoner resting in one of their rooms. After chatting with her and learning her name, Roe2, she goes off to find Henrietta, pondering why she reminded her of Shiroe.

9:40 AM - Maryelle and Henrietta, along with Hein, burst into Roe2's room after discovering they had no member by the name Roe2 in their guild. No one present. In fact, the room was barren like no one had been there to begin with.

Soujiro

8:30 AM - while on the way to grind with guild mates, two females: a shaman and a cleric, approach Soujirou, expressing desire to join his guild. The Shaman is named Kei and the Cleric is named Shi. Soujiro points them in the direction of a couple Soujiro fan club guilds. Both of them resemble twins, and looked like female versions of Shiroe

Krusty

1:00 AM - While training in a high level area, four adventurers arrive in the same area, requesting his help in raiding a small dungeon nearby. Upon Krusty striking the final blow against the boss monster, he turns to give them the reward, only for the four adventurers to have disappeared altogether. Upon recollection, a couple were reminiscent of Shiroe, though each had different names.

Investigation Team

11:30 AM - After comparing stories, they all turn to Shiroe, who promised to look into it.

12:30 PM - Henrietta reports that Roe2 appeared in Crescent Moon Guildhall again

12:45 PM - Investigation party arrives at Crescent Moon Guild Hall.

Maryelle and Krusty strode side by side through Crescent Moon, followed closely by the other guild masters and Shoryu. As they rounded the corner, Henrietta stood in front of the doorway, barring the exit route. She saw them. "Good, you're all here. Now we can get to the bottom of this."

Her hand twisted the doorknob, opening only for there to be no one inside. The room had no windows and seemed completely abandoned. Henrietta blinked in confusion. "But how?! I set restrictions on who could exit into the hallways. She was not allowed to leave. To be extra sure, I haven't moved from this spot since contacting you!"

Krusty glanced over at Shiroe. His glasses gleamed for a second as he shrugged. "Well, there's nothing we can do about it now. If you see Roe2 again, don't let her out of your sight. In fact, our Shiroe is not allowed to move without an escort keeping an eye on him at all times, not even at the toilet or shower. And if you see a version of Shiroe wondering about, don't let them out of your sight."

8.2 (OracleMask)

Haseo Awoke just outside the Home in Mac Anu. And as the loop memories slid into place, he looked around in awe. It was still Mac Anu, all right...but this was a fused loop where [The World] had replaced Elder Tales. Which meant that all the players had been pulled into the game-slash-alternate world that contained the 'real' Mac Anu.

Drinking in the scenery, Haseo whistled softly. For once, being trapped inside the game wasn't so bad.

And then the *rest* of his loop memories appeared.

"Oh hell -"

Haseo turned on his heel and ran as fast as he could toward the Home door, the Twilight Brigade's key already in hand. Inside, the scene was much as he feared.

Three players were hovering over a fourth - a man in long robes with a large metal case covering one arm - on the floor.

Naotsugu was about ready to tear his hair out. The four of them - Shiroe, Akatsuki, Chief Nyanta, and himself - had Awoken only a minute ago. This had seemed like an interesting enough variant loop, one of those with Elder Tales replaced by another game. He'd almost put his finger on why this one seemed so familiar when Shiroe, who had been investigating why his character had a weird metal case over his left arm - made a choked sound and dropped to the floor.

"Shiroe!"

It wasn't hard to see the problem: the case was shaking and rattling, and there was a *noise* , like nothing Naotsugu had ever heard in his life. Something was *inside* there and clawing around. That would have been alarming enough without Shiroe's *arm* being in there at the same time.

"This isn't...all of you, *stay back!* "

Shiroe was talking, but the fact that he was on the floor, white as a sheet, and clearly in *pain* meant none of them were listening. Akatsuki went so far as to try and physically pull the case off Shiroe's arm. All that did was break off a piece of metal, and Naotsugu

watched in horror as a *black and red tentacled THING* immediately began working to get out through the gap -

"OUT OF THE WAY!"

Jerkily, he stepped to the side as a boy in black leather shoved past. White hair, red markings on his face - wait a second -

"Haseo?!"

"Talk later, out of the way NOW," Haseo snapped.

Nyanta had already taken a step back, and Naotsugu hurriedly did the same, dragging a protesting Akatsuki with him. Haseo had taken on an eerie glow of his own, red lines appearing as he drew a familiar Phantasmal scythe from nowhere. His eyes were glowing too, but they were an odd shade of blue.

"Hold your arm out, Shiroe," Haseo stated flatly, already taking aim with the scythe, "I don't want to hit you by mistake."

"You came remarkably quickly," Shiroe said sometime later.

He tried not to look at his arm, which was still rather...unnatural. But the thing was gone.

"I always do when someone replaces Ovan," Haseo answered, "Lucky for you I was nearby. AIDA infections can get nasty. Tri-Edge is one of the worst."

"It seemed to take you very little effort to deal with, nya," Nyanta observed, "You killed it with one strike."

Haseo looked embarrassed all of a sudden.

"Well, I picked up this thing in a weird loop that comes in handy...Mystic Eyes of Death Perception are kind of cheating for everything else, but I don't like taking chances in this case."

"You didn't get a chance to meet her before - Haseo, this is Akatsuki," Naotsugu said, waving a hand between the two loopers, "Akatsuki, this is Haseo."

"Hi."

"Hello."

There was a quiet moment, which Haseo broke.

"Are you seriously a ninja?"

"Yes. What of it?" Akatsuki replied, eyebrows furrowed.

"...Nothing."

One of Haseo's eyes continued to twitch.

8.3 (drakensis)

"It's strange," Kei Shirogane murmured to himself. "I could have sworn Akatsuki was a player, not an NPC."

He'd worked with the lanky assassin a couple of times since the disbanding of the Debauchery Tea Party and never suspected Akatsuki was a girl even though 'he' never spoke. And then, right after the installation of the eleventh expansion pack, the 'lone wolf' had approached, asking to buy the shape-changing potion Shiroe had been carrying around for years.

In fact, had he ever mentioned the potion to Akatsuki?

Akatsuki's character appearance changing to a small girl on downing the potion wasn't entirely clear - perhaps she'd grown uncomfortable with not speaking to party-members and felt she could do so more freely now her appearance matched her voice?

"Well how else could she be offering us a quest?" Souji stood next to Shiroe, the only member of the DTP who'd been around for the engineering student to confide in. "Unless she's a GM..."

"But in that case, why not create a new avatar for the purpose? This doesn't make any sense."

"Well! It sounds like a really *fun* quest!"

There was that. And it was certainly an impressive challenge, but Kei had to wonder what Shiroe had done to qualify for a quest to install the small Assassin - one of the Ancients, it seemed - as the new Empress of all Yamato.

Standing on the roof of what had been and would perhaps again be the Log Horizon guildhouse, Akatsuki waited as the two players conferred.

As far as she could recall it would be a year and a half before Homesteading the Noosphere would be added as the next expansion - so she'd be waiting more than seventeen years for her friends to arrive as more than these fixed-face automatons.

That could be a long, lonely time if she didn't entertain herself. The first step was to secure a suitably imperial warchest by organishing a Raid into the depths of Palm.

"Excuse me, master," she whispered to herself. "May I kick the stupid loop in the face?"

I wasn't particularly aware of that being an issue but there's no problem in my mind with Shiroe awakening at the Catastrophe and finding Theldasia markedly different... and when he considers his local memories he finds out his part in it.

"Akatsuki..." Shiro realised they were surrounded by Lander court officials eyeing him curiously.

Akatsuki folded her fan. "Gentlemen, if you'll excuse me, a long awaited event has taken place. Please arrange for this box to be delivered to the Sage of Mirror Lake and don't offer any quests to Adventurers for the next two days."

"Of course, your Imperial Majesty." The courtiers backed out of the room except for one who boldly asked: "And the long awaited event, your Imperial Majesty."

A kunai embedded itself somehow in the floor. "I have a *very personal* quest for Shiroe."

"Err..." Shiroe looked around nervously as the door slammed shut. "Akatsuki?"

"I've been waiting for you for eighteen years, Shiroe-dono. Why am I still waiting for you?"

One robe at a time her imperial garb was hitting the floor.

Shiroe wondered how fast he could run away in the heavy court robes he was wearing... and if he wanted to.

8.4 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

Naotsugu stood back to back to back with Akatsuki and Shiroe. "Man, these squirrels never stop coming."

Shiroe's glasses gleamed over. "I've heard from Miss Sparkle that it might be a new virus by the Lovecraftian Hackers. Who can say for sure, but one thing we know: something's wrong with Yggdrasil."

Akatsuki looked at one of the squirrels who ventured closer, but hadn't aggroed yet. Her hand called forth an object from her subspace pocket. With a flick of her hand, the object slammed into the squirrel and transformed the being into pure energy. A second later, the object absorbed the squirrel and started rocking. After a few more seconds, the object clicked, indicating success.

Shiroe sweatdropped as the assassin picked up the Pokéball. "Akatsuki...when did you loop into the Pokémon universe?"

"A hundred loops back."

The enchanter shook his head and launched another nightmare sphere at the gathered squirrel mob.

8.5 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

Hundreds of adventurers surrounded the guild hall. with her tracking subclass, Akatsuki faded through the crowd with catlike ease, until she was at the front. The crowd stood just before the doorway. Some pressed themselves, trying to get in. However, they were all repelled, like an invisible barrier. It signified that Shiroe had prohibited anyone from entering. The crowd was angry and only getting angrier every second that passed. Krusty stood at the entrance to the building, fielding questions and trying to disperse their anger as best as he could. For a moment, Akatsuki wondered if she too was banned, until she stepped through the doorway. Krusty gave her a nod, then fielded a new set of questions and outraged rants at Akatsuki's arrival.

Beyond the doorway, there was a corridor between the entrance. Members of D.D.D. were standing watch over most of the guild halls, all of them were among the highest ranked members of the massive guild and those that Krusty personally trusted. There was several small crowds of people standing around the stone faced guild

members, shouting their outrage at being imprisoned within the building.

Akatsuki faded into the shadows and sought out Shiroe, who was sitting at a recently set up table to the side of the bank, writing up a set of contracts. Naotsugu intercepted Akatsuki and pulled her to the side. "Yo, Shrimp!"

Akatsuki rolled her eyes, not interested in giving him her usual reaction. "What's Shiroe up to now?"

Naotsugu crossed his arms, "Someone managed to rob the bank, made off with most of the adventurers' prized possessions."

Akatsuki blinked. It explained why no one would be allowed inside the guild building as of now since Shiroe probably wanted to investigate, but still... "Why did he prevent anyone from leaving?"

Naotsugu flashed a smirk while raising his thumb. "He thinks the thief is still in the building."

Shiroe looked up from his work with a determined expression on his face. "I know the thief is."

He withdrew a note from within his cloak and slid it across the table:

I have taken the items stored in safekeeping by the adventurers. I will remain within the guildhall for the next 24 hours. Can you catch me?

Akatsuki pocketed the note for later study. Shiroe pushed his glasses up on his face. "Only Log Horizon and D.D.D. members may enter, however no one will be allowed to leave until we catch the culprit."

The enchanter returned to his paperwork as Akatsuki peered over his desk. "And how do you plan to catch this thief?"

Shiroe gave a wicked grin. "Since I sealed the building, no one can enter or leave the main entrance. Further, no one may enter or leave

their guild halls. This will remain in effect until the perpetrator is caught. Those in the hallway itself will be required to sign this contract affirming they were not at fault for the bank heist."

"And if they were at fault?"

"The penalty will take effect and make it abundantly apparent who's at fault."

It took another two hours for the contracts to be completed. Within minutes, those gathered in the hallways were issued a copy of the contract. It was with great surprise to those not looping that the contract failed to react to anyone. It was decided to distribute to the landers and all members of Log Horizon and D.D.D. Again, no reaction. Shiroe reached into his subspace pocket and pulled out a strange top like device. He frowned as it was giving off several small whistles and spun on his palm. A moment later, he returned it to his pocket. "Akatsuki, check the hallways again."

The ninja nodded and faded into the shadows.

In a darkened corner of the hallway, furthest from the bank, a hand revealed itself, reaching for the doorway, only for a black sword to also appear from nowhere and land against the hand. "Drop...the...cloak..."

A moment later, a 17-year-old man wearing a white suite with an equally white silk hat stood there. "Not bad, miss. How did you know I was here?"

Akatsuki's disillusionment charm faded, revealing her. "Shiroe often checks the guild halls, especially after meeting the Joestars in case he runs into Dio again. You paid too close attention to Shiroe and not enough to Naotsugu and myself."

The ninja took that moment to study his character info:

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Even though confused at the lack of information, Akatsuki hid it behind her own poker face. She remembered the content of the second note Shiroe was careful to hide under the first:

Akatsuki, I am being followed. When I tell you to 'check the halls,' hurry to guild 5200 in the furthest corner of the north wing. I had Naotsugu plant a Sneakascope under a notice-me-not charm. Disillusion yourself and cast Finite Incantatem until you find the Sneakascope. Then, place the notice-me-not charm on it again, allowing you to be able to see it. When the time is right, you will be able to apprehend the perpetrator.

The teen gave a chuckle. "So that's why D.D.D. wasn't guarding this corridor."

Akatsuki's eyes narrowed. "Are you looping?"

The boy's poker face was still firmly in place, though his eyes widened the slightest amount. It could have been the trick of the light, but Akatsuki thought otherwise. "Which universe are you from? White suit and silk hat. Must be Kaito Kid from Shinichi's universe."

The boy pushed the blade aside and bowed. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, my dear. Now, watch and be amazed as I escape."

His other hand pulled out a pile of black sand and threw it at the ground. The powder expanded, turning the midday light into utter darkness. Akatsuki growled as she swung the blade at where Kaito Kid had just been. Shiroe had Naotsugu leave the building under disguise and make his way to the cathedral in case they needed to kill the culprit to prevent his escape. She made contact with something, but she felt his composition changed mid swing as an

explosion echoed down the hall. A second later, she heard a door open, then close. Half a minute later, the darkness powder faded, leaving Akatsuki alone with a bisected wooden log.

On Top of the Guild Hall

Shiroe stood across from a woman wearing a red cloak similar to his own along with a stylish Fedora in the same maroon color, "Thought I would find you up here."

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Shiroe gave a small grin as he removed a purple glass lens and held it to his eye. The lens glowed as her information shifted:

Carmen Sandiego

Human

Lv 100 Bard

Lv 100 Thief

Carmen gave a grin of her own. "I signed your contract, proving I haven't stole anything."

Shiroe smirked. "I have the honor of hosting the infamous thief, Carmen Sandiego. It is an honor, especially after Shepard telling me you stole Illos from under the combined might of the Citadel Fleets and the greatest specters who ever lived. Akatsuki is capturing your partner even now."

The woman blinked and tilted her head back. "You figured it out."

Shiroe's expression turned serious. "I've never seen another thief subclass this loop. What does it do?"

Carmen sighed, "Looks like I've been completely found out this loop. In honor of your *small* victory, I'll share a few things. It distorts and hides the owner's information. Additionally, it allows me to enter areas I'm otherwise not allowed to enter, including guilds I'm not invited to."

At that moment, Shiroe received a telepathic call from Akatsuki, chronicling her encounter with Kaitou Kid. His own eyes widened as his staff rose immediately. Carmen's grin turned into a smirk. "It also allows me to escape zones I'm not allowed to leave. Until next time, detective."

Her hand drew a three pronged kunai and flung it across the river to the nearest building. Shiroe wasn't fast enough in his casting as Carmen disappeared in a yellow flash. Undoubtedly, she'll head for Susukino, or the South. Shiroe sighed as he rested on his cane. Explaining this to those not looping was going to be difficult.

Regardless, it was going to be an interesting loop. Not to mention, he might want to brush up on his contracts, see what could be done with non-looping adventurers and what subclasses he could create.

8.6

"Why did we let Nureha take over Akiba again?" Naotsugu groaned while kicking at the stone wall of the (quite literal) dungeon. Having taken control of the Royal Guards, Nureha had instructed them to arrest the members of Log Horizon who had remained.

Shiroe laid back on the thin padding of the stone shelf that served as a bed. "Boredom? We made sure she couldn't take the Cathedrals first, after all. The situation isn't intolerable."

To protect those members of Log Horizon not yet looping, Shiroe had teleported the Minori, Tohya, Isuzu, and Rundelhous to Neverland as a precaution beforehand. Everyone imprisoned alongside Shiroe was Awake. They would be fine.

"Serara, please stop encouraging the plants and fungi," Akatsuki scolded her cellmate from the Assassin's perch on the ceiling.

Serara started. "Sorry!" She guiltily lifted her finger off the wall.

Akatsuki peered at the wall through the thin light filtering through the tiny window of unbreakable glass. "Nyanta and Serara forever?" she murmured in a low voice that would not carry to the other cells.

Serara blushed and hastily shifted to block the heart-enclosed words from view.

Akatsuki shook her head fondly. "In any case," she said more loudly, "Naotsugu made a valid point. Would not anyone do better than Nureha? Why did you decide on that?"

From his solitary cell, Nyanta contributed, "He was drunk at the time. I think he remained tipsy for perhaps a day. And then the hangover… That likely lasted the rest of the week."

There was silence.

"I didn't expect the raid boss to inflict that as a status effect," Shiroe defended hotly, "and it was entirely resistant to potions and healing." He cleared his throat. "Nureha does need significant therapy in order to regain…"

"Sanity?" offered Akatsuki.

"Rationality?" added Nyanta.

"Stability?" Serara wondered.

"Control of her stalker tendencies?" came from Naotsugu.

The other four all nodded. "That."

Shiroe continued, "I am sure that any single member of the Round Table would do better for Akiba than her. Especially with Indicus still around."

Naotsugu chuckled. "Why don't we test that?"

"Hm?"

"Not this loop," Naotsugu said, waving his hand animatedly, "but other loops when we're all around. We can set up the Round Table so that there's one leader. Rigging it to be a specific person each time shouldn't be hard."

Nyanta hummed thoughtfully. "Interesting. We would have them replace Krusty, then?"

Naotsugu shrugged, though Nyanta could not see it. "Eh, with a little more power than that. Make it less like a counil, more like a prime minister's cabinet."

"I bet Maryelle would make a great leader," Serara said thoughtfully.

"I wonder if we could get William to stay around," mused Akatsuki. She dropped off the ceiling and flipped to land sedately on the floor.

Nyanta said, "I would like to back one of the crafting guild leaders. Rodrick, perhaps."

"Maryelle would be my first choice, too," Naotsugu said loyally, "but after that… Soujiro, I guess?"

"It appears that we are all in agreement." Shiroe adjusted his glasses. "After this loop, I will abstain. In the meantime, shall we go depose an evil maid?"

Without Indicus around, Nureha just might work as a leader. At worst, she would be much less dangerous.

Naotsugu hit his fist against his palm. "Let's do it!"

Akatsuki agreed, "Yes. Have you worked your teleportation spell around this zone's permissions, my lord?"

Shiroe bowed like a showman. "Of course," he said. He snapped his fingers. They were gone before the sound had time to echo.

Shiroe mentally counted down the seconds, then checked the status screen to be sure. Satisfied, he nodded towards the shimmering circle of stones in front of them. "Alright, we're set. Go ahead, Akatsuki."

Akatsuki, balancing the bound and bespelled body of Indicus on her head like the maid weighed nothing, easily threw Indicus into the circle. Even meeting the stone floor face-first did not rouse her from her enchanted sleep.

Shiroe touched his finger to the circle. It glowed brightly, and then it was empty.

"Where did we send her?" Akatsuki asked disinterestedly. She knew Shiroe would have picked someplace where Indicus would not be able to get away, likely an isolated town with its own respawn point so that Indicus could not flee back home.

Shiroe stepped away from the Fairy Ring. "It's a place called the Lotus Isle. It is based on a place called the Isle of the Lotus Eaters from the Odyssey."

Akatsuki stared at him with half-lidded eyes. "So she will be on a drug trip the rest of the loop?"

He coughed into his fist awkwardly and didn't deny it. He hastily changed the subject. "Now, if we want Nureha to be a functional leader, we're going to have to give her a replacement assistant. Someone good with hard work and children. Patient, kind,

understanding, and entirely unthreatening, but willing to stand up for what she believe in."

"Have you informed Serara of this, my lord?" asked Akatsuki dryly.

"Better to beg forgiveness, as they say."

Akatsuki thought that if Shiroe interrupted Serara's planned date, Shiroe would certainly be doing that.

8.7 (Detective Ethan Redfield)

The sound of paper rustling filled Log Horizon's guildhall. The Awake loopers were gathered around the dining hall while Shiroe flipped through a checklist that would make War and Peace look like a pamphlet, "Sumo Wrestling 101...how to draw comic strips..." Shiroe looked up with an incredulous expression. "How to create edible slime? Miss Cherilee, how did you even come up with half these?"

Cherilee blushed. "Pinkie suggested that last one. Most of these are additions since looping here, what with an eight year lead up to the World Fraction taking place. The only reason I was online was Scootaloo, my adopted daughter for this loop, was trying to teach me how to play video games at the time."

Shiroe blinked and looked at the book. "Wait, you make this one over the last eight years?"

Cherilee looked a bit put out. "This is volume two. I ran out of paper in the scroll Twilight gave me."

Her hand reached forward, with Shiroe recognizing the motion for summoning an item from her subspace pocket. "If you want, you could look through that one-"

Shiroe shook his head violently. "NO! No, I think we're good."

Deciding it was better to change the conversation, "Why haven't we seen Scootaloo?"

"She was taking a nap when the clock hit midnight. She's awake, so she should be fine. Back to the matter at hand, can you teach me?"

Shiroe's eye twitched a bit as he gazed at the novel. "Well, we can probably cover some of these. With my scribe skills, teaching you how to draw comics would be no problem and Nyanta is our top chef. As for sumo wrestling..."

His gaze landed on Naotsugu, who flinched back. "Shiroe, you're not serious..."

The enchanter's glasses fogged up as his smile turned menacing. "You're not going to let this poor lady down, are you Naotsugu."

The Guardian choked for a second before Shiroe went for the killing blow, "Why, what would Maryelle think if you didn't do everything in your power to help Miss Cherilee here in her time of need?"

Naotsugu dropped his head in defeat. "Maryelle said it best, 'Shiroe, you're a demon.'"

As Shiroe watched Naotsugu give a lesson on sumo wrestling, Akatsuki had a confused expression on her face. "My lord, since when does Idiot Naotsugu know how to sumo wrestle?"

Shiroe smirked. "You weren't awake for it, since it was during his sports phase."

Akatsuki brought one hand down on the other. "Oh. That was just after his Captain Tsubasa loop. I still think using Anchor Howl to force the team to shoot the ball straight at him was a cheat."

8.& (LordCirce) - A view from other Loops.

Megamind sat up in bed. He glanced at his hands, and then jumped slightly. His hands appeared to have been replaced by odd claws. As he examined the rest of his room, knowledge started to filter in. He was...he was a Lego. Apparently, he was President Badness, and...he had never heard of this Loop before!

" *I can do my presentation!"*

Emmett woke up chained to a table again. He had decided to go and get the Piece of Resistance early this time around, but he had forgotten how trippy the visions were. It seemed that Bad Cop had picked him up again. As Emmett debated whether to play up the "I'm nobody" angle, the doors burst open to reveal President...Badness?

He was blue, and wearing a similar ensemble to what President Business usually wore, and he was caring a rather large whiteboard.

"Ok! So, all the security is turned off, and you are a Looper! Aren't you? Please say you are!" The new President dropped to his knees in front of the table, hands clasped in front of him.

"Uhhhhhhh, yes. Yes I am." Emmett spoke slowly.

"Yes! Alright, so, your world, your entire universe, is just one in a grand tree of..."

"Oh yeah, I remember this bit."

President Badness turned to look at him. "Eh?"

"Yeah. Last Loop. I had fingers, like the Man and Kid Upstairs, and this guy, Sheerow, or something, showed me how to..."

"NOOOOO!" President Badness dropped to his knees. "Curse You! Lost another Looper to Log Horizon! Why? Why?!"

Emmett sat there, shifting uncomfortably, then he carefully disassembled his chains and chair, turning them into a jet pack. "Well, uh, I'll just be going then. To somewhere that is certainly *not* Cloudy Cutie Land. Uh, yeah. Bye."

Chapter Notes

8.1: Awake Shiroe made duplicate accounts and started trolling.

8.2: Crossover with .hack/G.U. Haseo finds (being a) ninja annoying.

8.3: *starts humming "I Ship It"*

8.4: The Crisis of Infinite Squirrels.

8.5: Crossover with Magic Kaito (part of the Detective Conan continuity) and Carmen Sandiego. Perhaps Kaito went on to steal Minami while Carmen went for the moon.

8.6: Bound to lead to interesting things… and maybe Shiroe getting eaten by a tree..

8.7: Naotsugu adapts well to shounen stereotypes.

8.&: Emmett of The Lego Movie with Megamind of Megamind. Megamind keeps on trying to give new loopers the intro to the multiverse. Usually Shiroe gets there first.